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Economies of Excess

John Armitage

This theme issue of **parallax** is devoted to a study of the *economies of excess* – a term derived from the increasingly influential economic writings of the French cultural theorist Georges Bataille (1897–1962). Identified with Nietzschean and Hegelian-inspired examinations of inner experience, 'heterology' – the science of what is completely other – eroticism and sovereignty, Bataille is also Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard's premier theorist of excess.[1] 'The Notion of Expenditure' and *The Accursed Share* announced Bataille's opposition to classical or 'restricted' political economy and elucidated his general economic conception of a world surplus of biological energy that must not be hoarded but squandered.[2] Unearthing a sacrificial *Theory of Religion* and *potlatch* – gift-giving ceremonies in which profitless expenditure is favoured over possession – amongst American Indians, Bataille espoused profitless expenditure as the modern foundation of a revitalized economic relationship between technologically advanced and developing industrial societies.[3]

Timely in its spotlight on the *economies of excess* this issue is an acknowledgement that Bataille's economic theory now resonates far beyond France. An electrifying appraisal of everything from companionship and knowledge to surplus human consumption, corporeal production and transformation, technology, aesthetics, transnational child adoption, feminist international political economy and speed, *economies of excess* is guided but not confined by the writings of Bataille, Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Virilio and Marx. Unravelling these and other significant cultural theorists of general economy and surplus energy, the issue's fourteen contributors concentrate on the expanding universe of excess expenditure, an economic realm liberated from all previous constraints and almost all comprehension. Discovering self-sacrificial and near religious cultural ideas and practices embracing individual spending on products and people amidst opulent consumers and impoverished producers, several of the authors collected here advocate profitless expenditure while others interrogate the postmodern premises of the ruinous contemporary political and economic bonds between men and women, East and West.

Responding to the flourishing interest in Bataille's general economy in the English-speaking world, *economies of excess* includes his previously unpublished article on 'Friendship' from the 1940s as well as various other essays such as Plotnitsky's 'Bataillian' investigation of 'unknowing', materialism and the general economy of the body. Botting and Wilson's text on the filmmaker Quentin Tarantino and the

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consumption of excess, meanwhile, provides an outstanding encounter with the post-Bataillian economic ideas of Baudrillard. The separate Nietzschean inflected articles of Lingis and Mandoki on corporeal expenditure, materialism and aesthetic transmutation can be regarded as significant essays on general economy, surplus energy, sacrifice and, above all, *potlatch*. Critical analysis is given to Bataille's speculations on technology as well as his engagements with profitless expenditure and possession by Weinstein and Richardson's individual texts. The four non-Bataillian essays on the *economies of excess* are by Bauman, Vasseleu, Sassen and Armitage and Graham. Concentrating on contemporary concerns raised by postmodernists, feminists, Virilio and Marx these texts range across issues relating to consumer relationships, globalization, female child adoption practices in the United States and China, prostitution, illegal human trafficking and 'dromo-economics' or the political economy of speed.

Finally, I must end this editorial by voicing my thanks to Joanne Morra and Marq Smith who commissioned me to edit *economies of excess*, as well as to all the contributors and to the editors of **parallax**. However, there are many more institutions and people to whom I am indebted for their efforts in bringing the project to completion. Gratitude is owed to the financial assistance provided by the University of Northumbria at Newcastle's small grants for research scheme, my colleagues in the Division of Government & Politics and to the research assistance of Arthur Affleck. My appreciation goes to Hager Weslati for providing and translating Bataille's 'Friendship'. Credit is also due to Hager and to Roy Boyne, Neal Curtis, Mark Little, John Lechte, Nicholas Zurbrugg, Rosie Cunningham, John Donnelly, Charlie Blake, Kevin Robins and Mike Gane for refereeing articles. Particular credit is due to Michael Richardson for his crucial interventions regarding Bataille's 'Friendship' and to Marq Smith, Verena Andermatt Conley and Mike Weinstein for their agreement to referee several essays. Lastly, I would like to thank Joanne Roberts for her invaluable and continuing advice on my forays into the *economies of excess*.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, 'A preface to transgression', in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp.29–52; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Ian Hamilton Grant (trans.) (London: Sage, 1993).

[2] Georges Bataille, 'The notion of expenditure', Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (trans.), edited and with an Introduction by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp.116–129; Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, Consumption, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1988 [1949]).

[3] Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

parallax, 2001, vol. 7, no. 1, 3–15

Friendship[1]

Georges Bataille

I

I wished that the sky split open (the moment when the intelligible order of known objects – that remain inherently strange – becomes a presence intelligible only to the heart). I wished, but the sky did not open. There is something insoluble about this expectation of a ferocious beast, coiled up and eaten away with hunger. Nonsense: 'Is it God that I want to tear apart?' As if I genuinely were a ferocious beast – still my sickness gets worse. Because I am laughing at my own hunger. I don't want anything to eat – I would rather be eaten. Love eats me to the quick and there is no other *way out* for me except a quick death. What I am waiting for, in the darkness where I stand, is an answer. Perhaps for want of being crushed, I would remain like forgotten rubbish! There is no answer to this exhausting restlessness, everything remains empty. But if ... yet I have no God to beg.

To put it in as simple terms as I can: I beseech the one who thinks that my life is a sickness for which God is the only cure to remain silent for just a while, and then, if that person still finds a genuine silence, I ask him not to fear to draw back because he never saw what he was talking about. I, on the contrary, have looked the *unintelligible* in the face, and then I was set ablaze by a love so great that it would be impossible for me to imagine anything that could surpass it. *Happily*, I live my life at a slow pace, and I could not stop laughing. I did not take any responsibility either for the burden or the appeasing servitude that begins at the moment when someone speaks about a God. This world of the living is forced to face up to a lacerating vision of the *unintelligible* (a vision penetrated, transfigured by death and that is yet so glorious); but it is at that very moment that the seductive and reassuring option of theology appears. If man could see his submission, his vanity disarmed between the absence of a solution and the naive solution of the enigma that he is to himself, nothing would remain of him except a distorted form.

Because if there is in the end some immutable satisfaction, why am I cast out? But *I know* that satisfaction is unsatisfying, and that the glory of man pertains only to the consciousness that knows nothing beyond glory and unsatisfaction. One day, I would stop becoming tragic and I would die. Only that day gives its meaning to what I am, because from the outset I have put myself in its hard light. I have no other hope. Joy and love, and unbent freedom are in me linked to the hatred of satisfaction.

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Unsatisfaction appears under different guises. Hitler was unsatisfied the very day that he started the war. The vulgar representation of war assumes that satisfaction consists in the glory of conquest; one never supposes that satisfaction is impossible. But, ultimately, one must realize that greatness resides in recognizing oneself as impossible to satisfy.

Angèle de Foligno (Ch. 55) said that God gave to His beloved son a poverty so unparallelled that no one has ever nor ever will have its equal. And yet He is in the possession of *Being*; that is His property. He has substance, and this possession is so much His own that it remains beyond human expression. However, God made this notion so poor, as if the substance did not belong to Him.

It is purely a question of Christian virtues: poverty, humility. The immutable substance is not the sovereign satisfaction even for God. Depravation and death remain unapproachable elements on which depends the glory of whom *is* the eternal beatitude, the glory of anyone who possesses in his own way the illusory attribute of the substance. Such a devastating truth cannot be accessible, naked, for the feminine mystic. And yet, this truth can no longer be avoided from within an ecstatic vision.

There is the universe, and in the midst of its night where man comes to understand himself, he uncovers fragments of this universe. It is always an incomplete discovery. When a man dies, those that survive him are condemned to ruin the things he believed in, to profane that which he venerated. I discover the universe to be such and such, but one thing is sure, those who will come after me will not fail to point out my error. Human science must be founded on its accomplishments, but if its achievement remains incomplete [*inachevée*] then it is not *science*, it is simply the inevitable and fragile product of the will to science.

Hegel's genius consists in the fact that he made science dependent upon completion (as if any knowledge could qualify as such bearing in mind that it is constructed!). But of the edifice that he would have wanted to pass on, nothing remains but the outline of that part of the structure that is anterior to his time (an outline that had never been realized before him, and that has not been re-established again after him). Inevitably, the outline that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* represents is nothing but the beginning of a definite failure: the completion of knowledge is possible only if I admit that human existence is a beginning that will never conclude. Even when this existence reaches its extreme limit, it would not be able to find satisfaction, not even the satisfaction of demands that are alive in us. Perhaps existence will be able to define these demands as false according to the truth that belongs to it in its moment of drowsiness. But in relation to its own law, the truth can be revealed as such only on condition that I die and that everything inevitably incomplete in men dies with me. It is clear that if the cause of my suffering is overlooked, and if the incompletion in things ceases to undo human sufficiency, life itself will have become remote to man, and with it its own inevitable and remote truth (the only truth that is linked to it and expresses it): the fact that incompletion, death, the desire that cannot be appeased, are in being the wound that never heals, without which being would be no different from an emptiness devoid of light.

What appears at the extreme point of reflection is that scientific discoveries about the universe are important only in so far as they render every definite representation of this universe impossible. Science has continually caused the ruin of the already established concepts that constitute its greatness and more precisely than its greatness its very truth. Little by little, its movement brings out of an obscurity full of deceptive appearances, a bare image of existence. This means that someone keen to know, realizing that the possibility of knowledge continually escapes him, remains, in the end, in his learned ignorance, as the unexpected residue of the whole operation. And since the resolved question was that of being and substance, it seems to me, with the greatest vividness, that wherever knowledge has sought being, it has only found incompletion (that which while I am writing makes the 'depth of the universe' so open to me that I no longer sense any difference between knowing and the ecstatic 'loss of knowing'). An identity between subject and object (the known object and the knowing subject) only occurs when a science that is incomplete and that will remain incapable of being accomplished [*inachevable*] admits that its object is incompletion, and the unaccomplishable. From there the malaise that is caused by the compulsion felt by the unaccomplished (man) to meet up with completion (God) disappears. The 'ignorance of the future' (the *Unwissenheit um die Zukunft* that Nietzsche loved) is identified with the extreme state of knowledge, the event that man is to himself is no longer anything but an adequate representation (and therefore also inadequate) of the incompletion of the universe.

It was only through a representation of the incompletion of the universe that I found a coincidence between intellectual fulfillment and the movement of ecstatic exhilaration. I am not concerned with the Hegelian operation that suppresses the difference between the known object and the knowing subject (even though what is at stake here is something more than a mere simplification of terms). From the vertiginous slopes that I climb, I now can see that truth is founded on incompletion, (whereas Hegel founded it on completion) but that foundation is just a semblance! I have given up on that to which every man yearns and have found myself – glorious, intoxicated – carried along by a vivid and unrestrained strong movement. There is what happens [*qui a lieu*] and that cannot be justified nor criticized on the basis of some principle or other. It is an irrefutable (yet unfounded) attitude; it is not a position but a movement that maintains every possible operation of the spirit within particular limits. My conception is an anthropomorphism torn to pieces. It is no longer a question of reducing and assimilating the totality of what is to this paralysed and servile existence, but rather of the savage *impossibility* of our spirit that can neither avoid its limits nor maintain itself at their level. Then, an *Unwissenheit*, an ecstatic and beloved ignorance, becomes the accomplished expression of a wisdom that a vain hope can no longer encumber with debt. At the extreme limit of its development, thought aspires to being 'put to death', it is precipitated, as if by a leap into a sacrificial arena, and such as an emotion swollen to the point of tears, its plenitude lifts it to a level where the howling winds knock it down, where the definitive contradiction of spirits is rampant.

Everywhere, in every accessible reality and in every being, it is necessary to seek out the place of sacrifice, the location of the wound. Every being is affected only at the

point where it succumbs: a woman under her dress, a god in the throat of the animal offered for sacrifice.

The one who in his hatred of a selfish solitude demands his own loss in ecstasy takes the immensity of the sky 'by the throat' because it must bleed and cry out. A woman that is suddenly stripped naked opens up a field of delights (while when decently clothed she would leave all undisturbed). Similarly, the indefinite area is lacerated and, once torn apart, is open to the ravished spirit that loses itself in it in the same way that the body loses itself in the nudity that offers itself to it.

If the illusion of completion is not adequately rendered, in its totality and abstraction, in the representation of God, but rather evoked, more humanly, in the presence of an elegant yet partially clothed woman, her animality is glimpsed again and her gaze delivers in me my incompletion... it is in so far as existences appear to be perfect, complete, that they remain separate and closed in on themselves. Existences only open up through the wound of the incompletion of being in them. The different beings distinct from one another *communicate* because it is possible to talk about incompletion, animal nudity, wound, and it is in this *communication* from one to the other that they come alive through losing themselves.

II

It seems to me that life is equivalent to instability, to imbalance. And yet it is the very equilibrium of forms that makes life possible. When I move from one extreme to the other, from one impulse to the other, from abatement to an excessive tension, the movement may take place so quickly that it becomes nothing but ruin and emptiness. It is for that reason necessary to mark out stable pathways. It is pusillanimous to dread a fundamental stability more than to hesitate about disturbing it. Constant instability is as banal as total order. One can destabilize – or sacrifice – only that which is. Imbalance, *sacrifice*, are even greater when their object is balanced and *complete*. Such principles as these are in contrast to the moralities that resist change and tradition; they destroy the romantic morality of disorder as much as conservatism.

Even the search for ecstasy cannot avoid method. One has to refuse to take into account the familiar objections. They betray a willed inertia that is content with the disordered lassitude to which most beings are dragged. A method means that a war is waged on customary modes of leisure.

It is true that there can be no *written* method. A writing can only leave traces of the pursued trajectory. Other routes remain possible provided that one understands that the ascent is unavoidable and that it demands a struggle against the laws of gravity.

It is not the strictness of the method that is humiliating nor the inevitable artifice. What is called method comes down to going against the prevailing current. It is this very current that is humiliating and makes me lose my patience; the means, without

which it would be impossible to sail up this current, would have seemed more agreeable to me were they worse than they are.

The ebb and flow that occurs in meditation – in the mind, or depending on appearance, outside the mind – are similar to the extreme movements that animate living matter at the moment when the flower comes to take shape. Ecstasy explains nothing, does not shed light on anything, and neither does it justify anything. It is nothing but a flower, being necessarily as unfinished and as perishable as a flower. The only way to approach the lack of an exit is to take the flower and to look at it to the point of harmony in such a way that it can explain, enlighten and justify, *being* [*étant*] itself unaccomplished, *being* perishable.

The way of ecstasy passes by a region that is necessarily a desert. This region is however a site of apparitions – seducing or disturbing. Beyond that, there is *nothing* more, but a lost and unintelligible movement as if a blind man were staring at the sun with his eyes wide open becoming himself a blinding light. Let us imagine a change that is so quick, a combustion so instantaneous that any representation of substance becomes non-meaning: place, exteriority, image, so many words lacerated by what is happening. The only words that do not betray themselves entirely – *fusion*, *light* – have something in them that cannot be grasped. It is more difficult to talk about *love*, since such a word is burnt and lifeless, because of the *subjects* and *objects* that usually get it bogged down in their inability to love.

To carry on speaking about spirit and God means this: the love that involves two terms, this blazing type of love, is expressed with two terms that appear to be the most vapid. In reality, vapidity becomes then heavier because everything swiftly heads towards monotheistic completion.

I never want to lose sight of the immediate reality: a diesel train arrives at Saint-Lazare station, I am sitting in this train near the window. I exclude myself from the weakness that would consider this moment meaningless in relation to the immensity of the universe; that the universal is the only thing laden with meaning. This is possible only if we attribute to the universe the value of a finished totality. But if the universe is incomplete, then every piece, no matter how small it may be, is as significant as this presumed totality. I refrain from seeking in ecstasy a reality that, when situated on the level of the accomplished universe, would deprive of meaning the fact that 'a train arrives at the station'.

However, ecstasy is *communication* between terms (these terms can remain as undefined as possible) and communication takes a value that the terms involved did not yet have, it annihilates, in a sense, these terms in the same way as the luminous glow of a star (slowly) annihilates the star itself, as well as the objects that are so close as to be profoundly modified by the constant metamorphosis of the star into heat and light.

It is incompletion, the wound, misery, rather than completion that are the condition of 'communication'. But communication is not completion.

In order for 'communication' to be possible, one has to find a fault – as in the breastplate – a 'flaw'. A laceration in oneself, a laceration in others.

What appears to be without a 'flaw', without any fault, is a stable totality, any stable totality (house, person, street, landscape, sky). But the fault, the 'flaw' can occur.

Since it is a question of totalities that need, in order to exist, a mind to perceive them as such, the fault must also be subjective. The totality and its flaw are always made up of objective fragments. However, the flawed totality is profoundly real: the totality being something that is constructed, the perception of defect amounts to realizing that one is in front of 'something that has been constructed', the flawed totality is only 'profoundly' real since it is apprehended through the defect of fiction, a defect that is unreal as fiction, but that allows the return to the profound reality.

There is then:
changing and mobile fragments: objective reality.
Stable totality: appearance, subjectivity.
Flawed totality: change that takes place at the level of appearance, but through that there is a return to objective, fragmented, changing and ungraspable reality.

The return to an incomprehensible reality is usually a complex process. 'Communication' is necessary. When a man and a woman are attracted to one another, it is possible that they do not find one another directly, what links them together is the complicity in lust in which they find themselves. 'Communication' takes place between them through dark slackening, through the nudity of their organs. What is found in the encounter with the other is not the being that wants to persevere in itself, but on the contrary the being that is possessed by the need to lose itself, at least during the time of debauchery. The love that is between them means that they do not recognize in themselves 'being', but rather the 'wound' of the need of their being to be lost: there is no bigger sentiment than the one that attracts one wound to another.

It is more difficult to lose oneself alone.

If a man loses himself on his own, he is before the whole universe. If he has realized that the world was a perfect totality, he is before God. Because God is nothing more than holding steady and putting together all that the spirit perceives (and that becomes the empire of an eternal being). According to the outline that I have drawn, it suffices then to introduce the flaw in this totality, a flaw that will itself be borrowed from the system of appearances and is also an appearance in itself. The death of a God on the cross is the wound through which it is possible for the human mind to communicate with this God.

Beyond that, the 'death of God', as represented by Nietzsche, accomplishes the return to an 'objective, fragmented, changing and incomprehensible reality'. In this case, even in a fictional way, there is no longer communication with the other but a bare and merciless loss.

I have just been looking at the two photographs of torment that are in my possession. These images have become almost familiar to me. One of them, however, is so horrible that I could not help turning pale.

I must have stopped writing. I went, as I often do, to sit in front of the window: as soon as I sat down I felt I was drawn into a sort of ecstatic movement. This time I could no longer put into question, as I painfully did the previous night, the fact that a similar state is not more desirable than erotic pleasure. I cannot see anything: *this* is neither visible, nor intelligible or sensory in any way imaginable. *This* makes it painful, unbearable not to die. If I represent to myself everything that I have loved with anguish, one would have to characterize the stealthy realities, to which my love was linked, as so many clouds behind which was dissimulated *what is here*. The images of rapture are deceitful. *What is here* is more and more on the same scale as terror, terror makes it happen. Such a violent crash was necessary is order for *that to be here*.

Once again, I have been interrupted. This time, suddenly, remembering *what is here*, I must have sobbed. I wake up with my head emptied out – by dint of loving, of being *ravished*. I am going to explain how I reached such an intense ecstasy. On the wall of reality, I have projected images of explosion and laceration. First of all, I have succeeded in creating in myself a great silence. This has become possible to me almost every time I wanted to do that. In this silence, often insipid and exhausting, I was evoking all possible lacerations. Obscene representations, laughable, gloomy, were succeeding one another. I imagined a volcano, or a war, or my own death. I was seeking blindly. I was sure that ecstasy could do without the representation of God. I was experiencing the movements of a mischievous and gay repulsion at the thought of monks or nuns 'renouncing the particular for the general'.

The first day the wall collapsed I found myself in the middle of a forest and a solitude as bare as no other. During part of the day, I was disturbed by a sexual desire to which I was denied satisfaction. I tried to reach the extreme end of this desire merely by 'reflecting on' (without horror) the seductive images to which it is linked.

Obscure days succeed one another. Acute solemnity, happy complicity of celebration, if they are lacking all joy become intolerable: a crowd fidgeted about vainly without anything to eat. It ought to have been necessary for me to shout about the magnificence of life, but I couldn't. The outbursts of joy I was experiencing were no longer anything but empty excitation. I should have been a million voices crying out to the sky – the movements that go 'from the tragic night to the blinding glory of the day' turn a man sitting in his room into a half-wit. A lonely people would be able to endure them, a people hardened by the servitude of glory, living on glories, laughter and dreams that turn into realities.

What a people endure and exalt tears me down and breaks me up between things. I don't know what I want anymore: excitements harassing me like ephemeral flies, excitements that are yet burnt to ashes from the inside. At the moment when I am most exhausted it seems to me that an extreme result of the different play of forces, after different collisions, isolations and returns, can only be this distraction to the limit of the impossible.

I imagine this form of inevitable distraction. This thirst without thirst, these tears of a child who does not know what he wants nor what he is crying about in his cradle. This must be *ultima verba*, the very last spittle seed, to this world of dead suns satisfied

with a living sun. The one who enters this world of little thirsts and little tears without the naivete of a baby forgets that such an empty sphere cannot accept any words: one does not genuinely enter that sphere if he is still talking. He is contented with the common sphere where every word has a meaning, but *he is boasting*. He believes, by means of a lie, that he is adding *the last word* to what has been said. He does not understand that *the last word* is no longer a word because if there is disturbance nothing is left to be *said*. Crying babies cannot cry in words, nor is it conceivable that they feel the need to do so.

What I am and what I can assert:

There would be no thirst without thirst, without an abundance of drinks, no tears without an extreme joy. But this abundance *wants* the thirst without thirst, the excess of joy *wants* even the inability to cry. If only my excesses were the cause of thirst, tears or the impotency of others; they *want* this thirst, this impotency or these tears. If others crying out their thirst, in tears or with dry eyes, want also to *speak* I laugh at them more than I would laugh at children because they are trying, ineffectually and without knowing it, to cheat. If I shout or cry out myself, I know that my joy flows out again like the persistent roar of thunder of which only a remote peals can be heard. I am not short of memories; that is why I become like a baby rather than like a philosopher living on his soreness or an accursed poet who exists on half or a mere quarter of his memory. Even more, that such a misery, such damp pain, is the last *exhalation* of what we are, this lurks in the deepest part of me like a secret, a secret connivance with the unknowable nature of things, a wail of joy, or puerile laughter, precocious exhaustion: I am made of this, all this delivers me naked to coldness and to chance but with all my strength, I *want* to be delivered, I *want* to be naked.

As the inaccessible has opened up to me, I have given up the first doubt, the fear of a delicious and insipid beatitude. As I easily contemplate what has become for me an object of ecstasy, I can say that this object is lacerating, as sharp as a razor, or more specifically, a howl, blinding, dazzling to the point of screaming. But it is not just a single point; it is pervasive. Provocative nakedness, glinting nakedness is like a strident arrow directed at this point.

What is 'communicated', from this point to a being, from a being to this point, is the searing need to be lost. Through 'communication' beings cease to be closed in on themselves.

The 'searing need to lose oneself' is the part of reality that is the most interior but also the most remote living and turbulent part, but this has nothing to do with a presumed substance.

Particularity is essential to loss and to its abrupt fusion. Without particularity (at one point on the planet a train arrives at the station or something as puerile), there would be no such thing as 'a reality that escapes particularity'. There is a fundamental and easy difference to distinguish between sacrifice (or the sacred) and the divine substance (or rather the theological substance). The sacred is the opposite of

substance. It is the deadly sin of Christianity to have made of that a 'general creator of the particular'. There is no sacred without something that is initially particular even though the sacred is no longer particular. A philosophy that seeks to escape both the particular and the sacred is nothing but a flight that is always incomplete and incapable of being accomplished.

The moment of ecstasy is very different from the moment of sexual pleasure. It is rather closer to a given pleasure.

I don't give anything but I am illuminated by the (impersonal) joy that I feel and in whose presence I consummate myself as if I were filled with wonder by a woman that I kiss: the 'point of crying' of which I talked is similar to the 'point of pleasure' of a woman being kissed, her contemplation resembles the contemplation of this point of pleasure at the moment of its convulsion.

The method of ecstasy is the same thing as that of sacrifice, the point of ecstasy is stripping naked if I break in me the particularity that confines me into myself (similarly, the particular animal gives up its place to sacrifice at the moment when it is destroyed).

In this manner, I repress an image of torment and through repression I close down, repression is one of the doors through which my particularity is closed. If I look at that image again, it opens the door, or rather extracts it.

But this does not necessarily mean that I reach the exterior. Lacerating images (in the strict sense of the word) are continually taking shape on the surface of the sphere where I am enclosed. I can accede only to lacerations. I have done nothing but anticipate a possible exit: and the wounds congeal up again. *Concentration* is necessary. A profound laceration, a stroke of prolonged lightning must break up the sphere; the point of ecstasy is not reached *in its nakedness* without a painful perseverance.

When taking into account the decision to escape the limits of the individual and of the objects that are useful to him, it is natural to look for the way out by multiplying the 'disturbing' images while being involved in their play. These images reveal a lure in their painful and fleeting reality. They make you sentimental, they do not allow the access to the point where the thunderbolt takes place.

First of all, it is necessary to oppose to the familiar movements a state of calmness that equals sleep. One has to refrain from all images, to become in oneself an absorption so complete that any fortuitous image slips vainly to its surface. However, this absorption still needs an image to take place, one single imprecise image of peace, silence, night.

This first movement has something fallacious and irritating about it. The natural movement of life towards the outside is its opposite. The voluptuous or even heavy and painful torpor in which the mind enters is put into question even more in so far as it depends on humiliating techniques. It is necessary to observe the position of the stable body in relaxation without letting it slacken. Necessities are personal but

to begin with some preliminaries are useful such as taking a deep breath and surrendering oneself to the allure of the thorax as it is lifted by a very slow breath. In order to create an emptiness in myself, I have to avoid the infinite procession of ideas by associating them with other ideas and that is why it is better if the flux of images is made to be the equivalent of river beds through haunting sentences or words. These procedures should appear to be unacceptable to impatient minds. However, the same minds are usually tolerant of much more than that, they live at the disposal of mechanics to whom these procedures want to put an end.

If it is true that the intervention is *detestable* (but it is sometimes necessary to love what is detestable), what is more dangerous is not the displeasure involved but the risk of extreme lassitude or seduction. The first sleep is assuaging and ravishing. After that, appeasement becomes sickening. It is insipid; it is intolerable to live for so long a time in rapture.

For some days it is necessary to shroud life in an empty darkness. The result is a wonderful relaxation, the mind feels itself to be a limitless power, and the whole universe seems to be at the disposal of human will, but a troubling element is rapidly introduced.

III

Behaving like a master means that one is never accountable to anyone, that one is averse to giving any explanation about one's behaviour.

Sovereignty is either silent or disposed. Something is corrupt when the 'sovereign' gives explanations and tries to draw inspiration from justice.

Saintliness that is coming is thirsty for injustice.

The one who talks about justice is himself justice;

He suggests to his fellow men an upholder of the law, a father, a guide.

I could never suggest any justice.

My complicit friendship: here is all my character can bring to other men.

A feeling of wild celebration, licentiousness and puerile pleasures determine my relation to them.

Only a 'sovereign' being can know a state of ecstasy – if ecstasy is not the revelation conferred by the beyond.

The only revelation that is related to ecstasy that I have known is the totally naive revelation of man to his own eyes. This requires lewdness and foulness that morality cannot restrain – and happy friendship with what is naturally lewd and foul. Only man is a law to man from the moment he wants to strip naked in front of himself.

Just like the mystic, that is in ecstasy in the presence of God, must have the attitude of a *subject*, what commands man in front of himself must have the attitude of a 'sovereign' that is accountable to no one.

This idea can be expressed in emphatic terms and can clearly be retained: that existence is not possible wherever men consider themselves in isolation: it begins with conversations, shared laughter, friendship, eroticism, that is to say, that it only takes place when *being is passed from one to the other*. I hate the image of being that is linked to separation and I laugh at the recluse who thinks he is reflecting on the world. He cannot really reflect on it because by becoming himself the *centre* of reflection, he no longer exists, just like the *worlds* that disappear in all directions. But when I realize that that the universe does not resemble any isolated being that is closing on oneself but to what *passes from one being to the other*, when *we* burst out laughing or when *we* love *one another*, at that moment the immensity of the universe opens up to me and I become confused with their flight.

Then myself does not matter to me, it's a presence that no longer belongs to me – even if it was God's presence. I do not believe in God because I do not believe in myself and I am sure that one has to believe in an absurd way in the miserable self that we are to believe in what resembles that self, to believe in God (who is nothing but its guarantor) the one whose life is devoted – I would rather say to itself – to living, to being lost rather than to mysticism, at least this person would be able to open his eyes on a world where what he is can only have meaning when wounded, torn apart, *sacrificed* where divinity would not also be other than laceration (putting to death) and sacrifice.

Someone was telling me that God was no less necessary to someone who is well practised in contemplation than one boundary stone to another; if one wants a long blazing spark to spring up between them. It is true that ecstasy needs an object that triggers it off and that the action of this object, even though it is reduced to a point, is so lacerating that sometimes it becomes inconvenient not to call it God. But the one among my friends who suggested the example of the two boundary stones has added that a danger was likely. Thus named, the weightiness of the boundary stone takes the place of the free intensity. In reality, this object or this point placed in front of me, and that intercepts ecstasy, is exactly what others have seen, what they describe when they were talking about God. But they were nothing but victims of a childish rage to understand: what is clearly stated is what we understand faster. That is how the supposition of an immutable person, a principle that is organizing beings and nature, made it possible to understand quickly what contemplation encounters outside ardour and blinding light, reducing it to a familiar object of thought, and to the particular power that we are ourselves, projected in eternity, in the infinite, to obey a sentiment that is thought of as logical. I even believe that the representation of a power so worthy of obsession was favourable to the position of the object, of a point towards which ecstasy emerges. However, it was at the same time, a limit that is so precise and so stable for contemplation. But in the effervescence that is conjured up by ecstasy, one must remember that the necessary boundary stones, the subject and its object, must be consumed and annihilated. This means that at the moment when the subject dissolves itself in contemplation, the object, the god or God is nothing

more than a victim destined for sacrifice. (Otherwise, everyday life, the subject concentrated on the object that is useful for him, would sustain the servitude inherent to every action, whose rule is utility). It is in this manner that I can choose as object either my God, or even anything as divine but something more human: the young Chinese victim that I could see in some photographs covered with blood, bent back, his lips tightening, his hair standing on end out of horror, while the executioner torments him with a meticulous attention (he inserts the blade in the join of the ankle). To this miserable man, I could only be linked through the links of horror or through simple human friendship. But this photograph if I look at it 'to the point of agreement' it would annihilate in me the obscure and common necessity to be nothing more (or less) than the person that I am: at the same time this object that I have chosen was nothing but a horrible (storm) whose thunder and lightning were being lost in the immense universe.

The most important thing is that every man is a stranger to the universe, he belongs to objects, tools, meals, newspapers that confine him in a particularity ignorant of everything else. The only element that introduces existence in the universe is death; when a man represents death to himself: he no longer belongs to rooms, to relatives, he is involved in the free interplay of the worlds.

If one wants to see more clearly what is at stake, consider the opposition of wave theory and the theory of subatomic particles in physics. The first explains phenomena through undulations such as light, air waves or the ripples in the water. The second constitutes the world out of particles such as neutrons, protons and electrons whose simplest set are atoms and molecules. From love to light waves, and from personal beings to minute particles, the relationship is perhaps arbitrary or imposed. However these problems in physics help us to see how two images of our life are opposed, one is erotic or religious, the other is profane and down to earth (one is open and the other is closed). Love is a powerful negation of the isolated being that we find so natural, and even in a certain sense ideal, that an insect dies of the very embrace that it desired (the female is no less dazzled than the male, the birth of a new being or new beings is perhaps no less contrary to the law of individual isolation that precedes life, than death). The counterpart of these excesses is given in the need for possession of one by the other that does not only alter the only erotic effusions: it organizes the relations of mutual belonging between the devoted and the presence that he obscurely discovers (God for the thing of the devoted like the devoted is God's thing). Why deny that here there is the effect of an inevitable necessity? But to recognize that is not to give important names to the players of the game, the crying and lacerating 'point' that I have talked about radiates life to a great extent (even though it is – or since it is – the same thing as death) that if it is once stripped naked, the object of a dream or of a desire confused with it, finds itself soon animated, even ablaze and intensely present. The divine persons that are related to this presumed 'apparition' are not less available than a loved being, than a woman offering her nakedness to an embrace. The God perforated with wounds or the wife ready for pleasure are nothing more than the transcription of this bottomless 'cry' that ecstasy reaches. The transcription is easy (it is even inevitable) since we are obliged to fix an object for ourselves. But the one who accedes to the object in this fashion does not ignore the fact that he destroyed everything that deserves to be

called real object. And in the same way that nothing more separates it from its own death (that he loves while acceding to this form of intense pleasure that requires its advent); he will still have to link the sign of laceration and annihilation to the figures that answer his need to love.

The destiny that belongs to men has encountered pity. Morality and all forms of miserable feelings, terrified, even hostile: it has only rarely encountered friendship, until Nietzsche...

To write is never anything more than a game played with the ungraspable reality: no one can enclose the world in satisfactory propositions, and I would not want to have tried it. What I wanted: to make accessible to the *living* – happy with the pleasures of this world and disbelieving – the means that seemed most inaccessible to them (and which the acetic ugliness has preserved until now with its morose jealousy). However, as regards the one who does not look for pleasure (or joy) but rather rest, in no way does the presence that I bring forth give him the balance or satisfaction he needs. My present is ecstasy: it is lightning at play. A stranger to peace.

Translated by Hager Weslati

Note

[1] *Friendship* is an article by Georges Bataille published under the pseudonym Dianus in the journal *Mesures* in 1940. It is a significant essay in providing, in a sense, the germ of his project *La Somme athéologique*, which will ultimately consist of the books *L'Experience intériure* (1943), Paris: Gallimard, (translated as *Inner Experience* by Leslie Anne Boldt, 1988. New York: State University of New York Press); *Le Coupable* (1944), Paris: Gallimard, (translated as *Guilty* by Bruce Boone, 1988. Venice, Ca: Lapis Press); *Sur Nietzsche* (1945) Paris: Gallimard, (translated as *On Nietzsche* by Bruce Boone, 1992. New York: Paragon Press); *L'Alleluiah* (1947), Paris: Librarie August Blaizot, (translated by Bruce Boone and published in *Guilty* as above); and *Méthode de méditation* (1947), Paris: Editions Fontaines.) He had intended to develop the article as part of *L'Expérience intériure* in the chapter entitled 'Antécédents du Supplice'; in the event he used part of the article as the basis of the chapter 'Le point de l'extase' in *Le Coupable*. The title 'Friendship' is highly significant for the whole project of *La Somme athéologique*, which maybe said to be an attempt to re-think the notion of what friendship is – in the widest possible sense – in the context of a godless modern world. Central to this are questions about how we establish relationships, not only at a personal level, but also across the boundaries of time and space, in terms of our personal interests and involvements. What are the affective determinisms by which we choose certain relationships at the expense of others? How does the process of living itself serve to impel us towards following certain directions that directly have an impact upon our personal identity and sense of values? In what was an experiment with his own experience of the world, Bataille was endeavouring to locate and clarify issues of much more general concern.

Georges Bataille, the French philosopher and social theorist, was born in Billon 1897 and died in 1962. A surrealist, pornographer, Nietzschean-Hegelian Marxist and Durkheimian 'poststructuralist' all rolled into one, his major works such as *The Story of the Eye* (1928), *The Accursed Share* (1949) and *Eroticism* (1957), have influenced the writings of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard among numerous others.

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Effects of the Unknowable: Materialism, Epistemology, and the General Economy of the Body in Bataille

Arkady Plotnitsky

Du non-savoir lui même, il y aurait en somme impossibilité
de parler, tandis que nous pouvons parler de ses effets.
Georges Bataille

I 'Materialism'

My point of departure is Bataille's extraordinary two-paragraph early essay 'Materialism' (1929), announcing a radical materialist epistemology, eventually developed by Bataille and my main subject here. 'Materialism' has a deliberate and precise structure: the first paragraph offers a condensed, Nietzsche-like, critique of classical, metaphysical materialism as an idealism, even 'a senile idealism', of matter; the second appeals to a different, more critical and more alive, form of representation of matter. Bataille writes:

> Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave in to an obsession with the *ideal* form of matter, with a form that was closer than any other to what matter *should be*. Dead matter, the pure idea, and God, in fact answer a question in the same way (in other words perfectly, and as flatly as the docile student in a classroom) – a question that can only be posed by philosophers, the question of the essence of things, precisely the *idea* by which things become intelligible. ... [Materialists'] need for external authority in fact placed the *must be* of all appearances in the functional role they unconsciously assigned to the idea of science. ... The conformity of dead matter to the idea of science is, among most materialists, substituted for the religious relations earlier established between the divinity and his creatures, the one being the *idea* of the others.[1]

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In the second paragraph, Bataille makes an extraordinary move by suggesting that it is 'from Freud, among others – rather than from long-dead physicists – that a representation of matter must be taken'. He explains: 'Materialism will be seen as a senile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately based in psychological or social fact, instead of on artificially isolated psychological phenomena... When the word *materialism* is used, it is time to designate the direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, and not a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis elaborated under the sign of religious relations'.[2]

If, however, in our approach to the representation (or unrepresentability) of matter, we can no longer rely on the *long-dead* physicists, whose 'ideas today have no meaning', what can be said of the ideas of those who were alive at the time? The date, 1929, at the opening of the debate concerning the epistemology of quantum physics, and ascertainable links throughout Bataille's works suggest that behind Bataille's reference to the long-dead physicists is one to the physicists and physics that were, and still are, very much alive. This physics, I argue, proceeds, most radically in Bohr's work, towards the kind of epistemology and materialism that Bataille envisions, and helps to elucidate both.[3]

II Sovereign Concepts

If one could *sum up* Bataille's experience, thought and writing in a single phrase, it would be his own phrase 'encounter with the impossible', 'the impossible' itself eventually used by Bataille as his title.[4] This statement must be understood not so much in the sense that these are shaped by an encounter with the impossible, but in the sense that they *constitute* this encounter, or are reciprocal with it. Nor, by the same token, can one say that Bataille's experience and thought precede and are then (re)presented in his writing; these relationships, too, are defined by a complex mutual reciprocity. Accordingly, in part following Derrida, I shall speak of Bataille's *writing* as designating this multi-reciprocal field. This type of multi-reciprocity is one of the effects of 'the impossible' to which Bataille's 'encounter' aims to relate, in, in Blanchot's terms, the form of 'nonrelation', thus enacting the radical epistemology under discussion. It would also constitute a form of what Bataille calls 'sovereign' practice, even though, while the efficacity of (all) knowledge, the impossible itself in question cannot be mastered by any knowledge, is irreducibly unknowable (the term correlatively employed by Bataille). Thus, Bataille's writing *is* his experience – the experience of existing at 'the limit of the possible' and on the threshold of the impossible – using, however, the term 'experience' in Bataille's sense of 'interior (or inner) experience' [*expérience intérieure*], in juxtaposition to the classical concept of experience as the experience of presence and particularly of consciousness.

The phrase 'encounter with the impossible' occurs in *Inner Experience* [*L'Expérience Intérieure*], an installment, along with *Guilty* [*Le coupable*], and *On Nietzsche* [*Sur Nietzsche*], of what was originally conceived of as *La somme athéologique* – a quasi-autobiographical 'summing-up' of this encounter and a conceptualization of interior experience.[5] However, the atheological or, more generally, a-ontotheological nature of this encounter and of this 'summing-up' makes them rigorously un-summable.[6] Both and,

hence, Bataille's writings 'decohere' away from any *attempt* to link them to classical, for example, dialectical, or any conceivable wholeness (a coherent arrangement of parts). I stress 'attempt' because one cannot think here in terms of some (logically or ontologically) preexisting coherence from which one would then decohere. Bataille's practice is defined by heterogeneous but mutually engaging – heterogeneously interactive and interactively heterogeneous – relationships among various problematics, terms, concepts, fragments and other elements of Bataille's text, rather than by any single one of them or a summable totality of them.

A different form of organization is at stake, which is a consequence of Bataille's radical epistemology, here at work in his own writing. The particular elements involved interact and are organized (i.e. we may meaningfully consider configurations formed by them as having structure). This organization, however, does not govern the functioning of each of these elements in their particularity. Instead, it allows them to assume singular and independent significance – to the point of defying any attempt to define them by any denomination and thus making each unique or singular. Indeed, the same dynamics may govern each element of the (always arbitrary) initial arrangement, in which case the (untotalizable) whole would be reorganized accordingly. Bataille's writing continuously submits to and enacts these dynamics, even though and *because* it pursues that which escapes even these (far-reaching) dynamics or indeed anything; that which is irreducibly inaccessible, inaccessible even as 'inaccessible' or as 'that'. For, the efficacity itself of the interplay of the (organized) collective and (singular) particular elements, or of either type of 'effects', to begin with, appears to be irreducibly inaccessible in the same sense. As such, it cannot be assigned any available or conceivable terms, such as 'underlying' or 'efficacity', which makes Bataille appeal to the radically, irreducibly unknowable and, in conceiving of this (ultimately itself inaccessible) process, to 'unknowledge'. Nor, however, can it be postulated as existing in itself and by itself as anything to which inaccessible properties can be assigned. Accordingly, the unknowable is not something excluded from the domain or the configuration in question, as an *absolute* other of it, which would return the situation to a classical regime by enabling one to master the unknowable by exclusion. Instead, it is irreducibly linked to this configuration and made the efficacity of the effects that define it.

The situation may appear paradoxical or impossible. Indeed it does lead to an epistemology that, while technically free of contradiction, is complex and difficult, and for some impossible to accept, especially since, in addition, radically heterogeneous or even contradictory effects must both be engaged with. Bohr speaks of complementary effects in quantum physics in this sense. One can, however, avoid logical paradoxes here only at the expense of introducing something that cannot be accessed by any means in the field of investigation and making it the efficacity of all accessible effects. In quantum mechanics, contradictions arise only if one attempts to apply attributes of these effects, say, simultaneously wave and particle properties, to quantum objects themselves. Bohr, by contrast, argues for the impossibility of so doing, which enables him to avoid all contradiction and ambiguity in quantum theory and replace them with complementarity, which refers only to the (mutually exclusive) manifest effects of the interactions between quantum objects and measuring instruments, rather than quantum objects themselves.[7] In Bataille such

contradictions, for example, between death and eroticism, to some degree remain in place, as experimental effects, and in this respect (in contrast to the status of the unknowable) the situation is different from quantum mechanics. Bataille's direct references to quantum-mechanical complementarity, as in *Guilty*, must be read with this difference in mind.[8] At this limit, one encounters an irreducible loss of meaning, which, at the level of the experience of this loss itself, could lead to interior experience and/as sovereignty, as defined by Bataille. What is intolerable to some, but would be affirmed by and is a necessary condition of interior experience and sovereignty, is that this irreducible loss of meaning is the efficacity of all possible meaning.

In question, as Bohr said, is not an arbitrary renunciation of a further analysis of the situation but the recognition that, at a certain point, any further analysis is in principle excluded. This impossibility, however, does not preclude, but instead enables, a rigorous analysis of the effects of this unknowable efficacity. Hence, according to Bataille, 'it would be impossible to speak of unknowledge [for example, as 'unknowledge'] as such, while we can speak of its effects'.[9] Reciprocally, 'it would not be possible to seriously speak of unknowledge independently of its effects'.[10] The conjunction of both propositions defines both Bataille's and quantum-mechanical epistemology. It is not surprising, therefore, that strictly analogous formulations are found in Bohr. In particular, we cannot speak of 'the quantum world' itself (for example, as 'the quantum world') but only of the *effects* of the interaction between 'quantum objects' and measuring instruments.[11]

In Bataille, this 'formal calculus' is applied to such ordinary human effects as laughter and tears, which are in question in the elaboration just cited – except that these are neither ordinary nor, in a certain sense, even 'human'. They are joined with, and coupled to, such (more conventionally) extraordinary effects as sexual excitation, poetic emotion, the sense of the sacred, ecstasy, sacrifice, and the death of God.[12] The conjunction, characteristic of Bataille, of a formal theoretical framework and something that is outside formalization is, thus, given a rigorous epistemological justification by virtue of the fact that these effects, the uniqueness of each occurrence of such phenomena, are 'formalized' as irreducibly unformalizable, while *accessible*. By contrast the efficacity of all effects involved is irreducibly inaccessible, unknowable, and is inferred as such from 'the sum of these effects [*la somme de ces effets*]'.[13] How this dynamic conspires to make such effects form rich and complex orders is equally mysterious, although it cannot be seen as (ontotheologically) mystical since the sum of these effects disallows one to postulate a single, omnipotent agency behind them.

Although elements of this logic are found in Bataille's earlier works, such phenomena as heterogeneity are seen there in more immediate and classical-like terms of discontinuity and fragmentation, such as that of the body, without pursuing their nonclassical efficacity, just outlined. Ultimately, however, similarly to quantum physics, discontinuity or fragmentation in Bataille should not be seen as the underlying reality or efficacity of the world, while, say, continuity and wholeness are effects superimposed upon it. Instead, both must be seen as manifest effects of the unknowable. The dismemberment or 'decoherence' – the divergence, ultimately irreducible and uncontrollable, of the meaning of concepts, figures, tropes, signifiers, and so forth – of writing manifests the ultimate inaccessibility of (the constitution of)

the world through peculiar configurations of material, phenomenological, and linguistic effects. In Bataille's later work 'heterogeneity' came to designate these more complex relationships. Various configurations of effects, entailing this type of efficacity, emerge at the outset of his work.

Bataille's own writing becomes a particular case of this epistemology and logic, which defines the epistemology and logic of reading accordingly. They would never allow (Bataille or his readers) a rigorous 'summing-up' of Bataille's (interior) experience and writing, under a single non-provisional rubric, such as 'encounter with the impossible', or 'encounter' and 'the impossible'. This impossibility, however, is also the efficacity of the immense possibilities, of 'the abyss of possibilities', enacted by Bataille's writing and offered to his readers.[14] It follows that, in approaching Bataille's 'encounter with the impossible', one cannot bypass other concepts introduced by Bataille and/in their irreducible interactions, anymore than Bataille himself could avoid (heterogeneously) multiplying them. I can here only delineate some of them, especially crucial for this essay. Beyond 'interior experience', they include 'unknowledge', 'chance', 'sovereignty', and 'restricted and general economy'. It also follows that one can centre one's reading otherwise, say, on sacrifice, gift, eroticism, ecstasy, expenditure, heterology, or literature. In particular, Bataille sees 'literature' as the highest or the most intense form of the encounter with the impossible and/as of the writing of sovereignty, or rather he defines (true) literature, accordingly.

The concept of unknowledge (*nonsavoir*) defines the nature or structure of our knowledge under the conditions just outlined. The ultimate nature of unknowledge is itself inaccessible: we cannot know how we ultimately know anymore than what is ultimately responsible for what we can know. However, even though unknowledge thus places an irreducible limit upon all knowledge, it brings into play the limits both of the knowable and the unknowable, the possible and the impossible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, and so forth and of the relationships between them and their limits.

Bataille's matrix entails an epistemologically radical concept of chance, correlative to his radical epistemology and, hence, to the quantum-mechanical concept of chance. Bataille sees this chance as inaccessible to 'the calculus of probability', or, one might add, any calculus.[15] This chance is irreducible not only in practice (which may also be the case classically, in physics or elsewhere) but also in principle. That is, there is no knowledge that could in principle be available to us and that would allow us to eliminate chance and replace it with the picture or claim of necessity behind it. Nor, however, can one postulate such a (causal/lawful) economy as unknowable but existing in and by itself, outside our engagement with it. This qualification is crucial. For, some forms of the classical understanding of chance allow for this type of (realist) assumption. By contrast, radical chance, such as that which we encounter in quantum physics, is irreducible to any necessity, knowable or unknowable. It is *irreducibly* lawless.[16]

Bataille's understanding of chance is presented most dramatically in *Guilty* and 'Conférences 1951–1953'.[17] Bataille speaks of this 'gossamer-like lacerating idea of chance' as 'a philosopher's despair', just as it was the despair of classically-

philosophical opponents of quantum-physics, such as, most famously, Einstein and Schrödinger, founders of quantum physics who never accepted it. For Einstein 'God does not play dice', for Bataille (keeping his atheology in mind) God does.[18]

By analogy with (the science of) political economy, 'general economy' is defined as the science (theory) of sovereignty. Bataille juxtaposes general economy to 'restricted economies', such as that of Hegel's philosophy or Marx's political economy. Restricted economies would aim or claim to contain or compensate for irreducible indeterminacy, loss, and non-selective – excessive – accumulation within the systems they describe, at least in principle, thus making all expenditure, in principle, productive. Both fundamentally base their analysis of human practices on the idea of consumption or productive (or accountable) expenditure, rather than on taking into account sovereign practices. These are assumed to be irreducible by general economy and the engagement with them defines sovereignty, the primary concern of general economy, making it the science of sovereignty. Bataille's 'sovereignty' is expressly juxtaposed by him to the Hegelian mastery [*Herrschaft*], although it may also be seen as an ambivalent displacement of the latter, especially as concerns death and sacrifice.[19] Bataille writes:

> The science of relating the object of thought to sovereign moments in fact is only a *general economy* which envisages the meaning of these objects in relation to each other and finally in relation to the loss of meaning. The question of this *general economy* is situated on the level of *political economy*, but the science designated by this name is only a restricted economy – restricted to commercial values. In question is the essential problem for the science dealing with the use of wealth. The *general economy*, in the first place, makes apparent *that excesses of energy are produced, which by definition cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning.* This useless, senseless loss *is* sovereignty [emphasis added].[20]

Sovereignty, thus, relates (here seemingly 'thermodynamically', but ultimately epistemologically 'quantum-mechanically') to the irreducible loss of meaning, which is also always excessive, in particular with respect to any possibility of containing it by presence, consciousness, and meaning. It is experienced or felt (in unknowledge) as unmanifest and unmanifestable in manifest effects, of which we can speak, for example, those of the loss meaning, excessive expenditures, and so forth. We must, thus, be careful to distinguish sovereignty and general economy. The practice itself of the latter may, however, be 'sovereign', or a form of interior experience. Conversely, a given interior experience, such as Bataille's, may acquire aspects of scientific investigation, although his writings presenting it, such as *Inner Experience*, are different from the theoretical genre of *The Accursed Share*, *Theory of Religion* and related works.[21]

It is crucial that general economy entails a deployment of restricted economy. These relationships are irreducible insofar as general economy is the science of the relationships between what is accessible by restricted-economic means and what is inaccessible by any means, whether those of restricted or those of general economy.

The inaccessible itself can only manifest itself by means of particular configurations of effects, each of which effects is manifest within a restricted economic regime, without allowing itself to be comprehended by restricted-economic means, and thus establishing the relation to the incomprehensible, the unknowable, the inaccessible. Short of engaging with this interactive dynamic, one always ends up with a restricted economy, even in the name of excess, indeterminacy, loss of meaning, and so forth. These relationships also reflect richer and subtler relationships between various forms of human practice. According to Bataille: 'It is regrettable that the notions of "productive expenditure" and "nonproductive expenditure" have a basic value in all the developments of my book. But real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of *purely* productive expenditure; in actuality it knows nothing of *purely* unproductive expenditure either'.[22] These complexities are often missed by Bataille's readers, which leads to misunderstandings of Bataille's thought as uncritically idealizing expenditure, loss, and so forth.

III The General Economy of the Collective, the Dismemberment of the Body, and the Decoherence of Writing

Thus, paradoxically (or, again, so it may appear) Bataille's radical epistemology defines knowledge by the fact that it allows for and indeed entails that which is irreducibly unknowable, ultimately unknowable even as (absolutely) unknowable. At the same time, however, this unknowable is not something that is excluded from the domain or system subject to knowledge; it is not an *absolute* other of the system, but is irreducibly linked to it. Now, is there a 'model' of this situation, which would be rigorous and consistent, as opposed to leaving it in the domain of the imaginary, even if the latter allows for a form of interior experience, by analogy with certain mystical experiences, such as that of negative theology? If there is such a model, how can it be realized? Do in fact such situations exist in practice? The answer, as we have seen, is yes, since 'nature' itself, in the form of its ultimate constitution, compels us to develop such a model. Bataille and several others (Nietzsche, Blanchot, Levinas, Derrida, and de Man, among them) offer us an effective understanding of the human world – psychological, ethical, cultural, political, economic, or still other – in similar terms.

I shall now delineate this model more rigorously, formalizing and amplifying the key concepts of the preceding discussion. I shall then relate it to the general economy of the political collectivity and the dismemberment of the body in Bataille, and finally to the fragmentation of Bataille's own writing.

The complexities and implications of the concept defining this model are many and far-reaching. The initial configuration defining it is, however, simple: the representation of the 'collective' may, in certain circumstances, be subject to organization and law; that of the 'individual' is irreducibly lawless. To allow for this double requirement, the efficacity of this configuration cannot be seen as either individual or collective, and ultimately cannot be assigned any available or even conceivable attributes.

The above formulation does not merely mean that formalization or law in this case does not apply in certain exceptional situations. Instead, *every individual* entity (element, case, or event) that belongs to the law-governed ('organized') collectivities in question is itself not subject to the law involved, or to law in general. More accurately, one should speak of *what is 'seen' (is phenomenal) or represented as such an entity or such a collectivity*. For, while law here does apply only at the level of certain collective, rather than individual, effects, both types of *effects*, lawful and lawless, are *manifest*, materially or phenomenally. That is, when involved, material strata of such effects may, at least, be treated as available to phenomenalization, representation, conceptualization, and so forth. By contrast, the ultimate *efficacity* of these effects cannot, in principle, be so treated, although it may be considered as material, if we reconceive 'matter' accordingly. It is inaccessible not only to organization and law, but to any representation, phenomenalization, and so forth. It is inaccessible by any means that are or will ever be available to us; any conception of it is, and may always be, impossible, ultimately even that of the impossibility of conceiving it; and all conceivable terms are provisional and ultimately inadequate, including, 'efficacity' or 'ultimate'. Nor, however, can it be seen in terms of independent properties, relations, or laws, which, while unavailable, would define a certain material entity that would exist in itself and by itself, while, in certain circumstances, giving rise to the (available) effects in question. Instead, it must be seen as 'reciprocal' with and indeed indivisible from its effects, as Bataille indeed says ('Il est nécessaire de noter à cet égard une réciprocité'). It can never be, in practice and in principle, conceived as isolated, separate from them, and, according to Bataille, it cannot be meaningfully spoken of 'independently of its effects'.[23] Nor, however, can it be seen as fully 'continuous' with these effects. All individuality or, conversely, collectivity in question appears (in either sense) only within the manifest strata of such indivisible configurations. These configurations, however, also contain the inaccessible strata that cannot be isolated and hence cannot *appear*, either as accessible or even as 'inaccessible'. It is irreducibly inaccessible and yet, indeed as a corollary, equally irreducibly indissociable from that (part of the overall configuration) which is accessible – is subject to phenomenal representation, conception, knowledge, and so forth. Thus, the general-economic epistemology does not imply that nothing exists that gives rise to the effects in question, but only that their efficacity or the corresponding 'materiality' (which also designates something which exists when we are not there to interact with it) is inconceivable in any terms. Naturally, 'existence' or 'nonexistence', too, are among such terms, as are the possibility or impossibility to 'conceive' of it, or 'possibility' or 'impossibility', or 'it' and 'is'.

In these circumstances, then, classical (we may have no other) organization and laws apply only to collectivities, but in general not to individual elements comprising such collectivities, or at least to the ultimate individual elements of that type. I am not saying that they fully describe such collectivities, since, as follows from the preceding discussion, how the 'workings' of the efficacity just considered make lawless individual elements 'conspire' to assemble into lawful collectivities is ultimately inconceivable as well. Accordingly, the (lawless) individual effects in question can no longer be seen as a part of a whole, so that both are comprehended by the same law, or by a correlated set of laws, as they would be in restricted-economic systems. Individuality

becomes not only uniqueness but also singularity – manifest lawlessness in relation to a given law, or to law in general.

The preceding elaborations outline the 'formal' structure of general-economic collectivities (of whatever kind), which, reciprocally, requires a radical reconsideration of our understanding of organization and law, whether in their formal, theological, ethical, or legal sense, or in the heterogeneous interaction of all these. Such collectivities are considered by Bataille throughout his work, specifically in the three volumes of *The Accursed Share*, which undertakes an extraordinary, if (especially in unfinished Volumes 2 and 3) uneven and too sketchy, analysis of the contemporary political systems – capitalist and communist – up to 1960. Accordingly, fascism, Soviet communism, and American capitalism are given a special role. Bataille's analysis would require some adjustment and updating. Much, however, remains applicable and as yet barely developed, in particular to the role of eroticism (Volume 2) and the significance of Nietzsche's ideas (which subject closes Volume 3), in spite of the massive investigation of both subjects, both in general and in recent discussions of Bataille. Crucially, while the examples given above may appear to be (restricted-economic) cases of purely productive expenditure and nonsovereignty, in fact, as Bataille shows, they entail a complex functioning and the efficacity of sovereignty throughout, and, correlatively, a complex interplay of individual and collective configurations. Bataille's central politico-economic question in Volume 3, remains as pertinent as ever: 'We should finally ask ourselves, then, whether this world, communist or bourgeois, which gives primacy to accumulation is not obliged, in some form, to deny and suppress (at least attempt to) what there is within us that is not reducible to a mean, what is sovereign'.[24]

This question is irreducibly linked to the general-economic relationships between the individual and the collective. This may well be especially (but not exclusively) so in the economical-legal-political or indeed geopolitical landscape of the twentieth century, from Ford's assembly lines, Stalin's collectivization and industrialization, Hitler's enormous machine (all these have obvious military implications) to any number of more recent – postmodern – politico-economic (or legal and cultural) phenomena. The list would be long and banal, short of a proper treatment of each case, which cannot be undertaken here. Instead, I would like to consider the economy of (the dismemberment) of the body in Bataille. It may be seen as his initial approach to and deployment of the logic and epistemology under discussion. It reemerges with its ultimate force in his post-war works, such as *The Tears of Eros*.[25]

This economy is impossible to miss, beginning with the titles of his short essays, naming parts of the body, such as 'The Solar Anus', 'Eye', 'The Big Toe', 'Mouth', or 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh' (all in *Visions of Excess*). The problematic itself never leaves Bataille's text, but the treatment acquires a much greater epistemological subtlety. The vision of the human body that emerges in these essays is similar to that of Empedocles, who, as one stage of his cosmology, envisions 'faces without necks, arms ... without shoulders, unattached, and eyes ... alone, in need of foreheads'.[26] The violent end that famously befell him (he committed suicide by jumping into a volcano) adds poignancy to the parallel. One shudders to think of and especially visualize the self-mutilation involved,

although, Bataille, on many occasions, offers to and demands from our vision nothing less shattering.

Such a vision may be aestheticized or Oedipalized insofar as, according to de Man, it is seen as possible only by first 'severing', formally or (naively) psychoanalytically, the parts from 'the organic unity of the body'.[27] Something altogether different takes place in Bataille, although psychoanalytic economies, both Freudian and Lacanian, are deployed in the process. Divested of organic or otherwise restricted-economic unities – physical, biological, psychoanalytical, erotic, political, conceptual or linguistic – in which 'parts' are related within a whole, or rather divested of our grounding them in such unities, parts are placed within a much broader, global (but untotalizable) play of forces. The general-economic placement of eroticism is correlative and part of this process.[28] In terms of general economy, such parts are singularized away from the organic unity of the body, divested of any lawfulness, and are instead placed within nonclassical forms of circulation and laws, in which the body (any given body and the concept) is radically refigured in turn.

This process can be traced in all earlier essays just mentioned, in relation to any given body-part they discuss – each is always (re)globalized as part of an untotalizable body, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, 'a body without organs', upon which sovereignty is general-economically inscribed. One can also trace throughout a radical materiality in this inscription – physical, politico-economic, or linguistic. The process is more aesthetically or psychoanalytically (or surrealistically) standard in earlier texts, such as 'Eye' or 'The Big Toe', although the role of political sovereignty is irreducible in both essays. By the time of 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh' (1930), preceded by such political-economic essay as 'Materialism' and 'The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*', the case becomes nearly general-economic. In the process classical concepts such as eros, death, sacrifice, gift, and so forth are reinscribed accordingly.

Bataille's approach may, finally, enable us to make better sense of the still continuing cultural circulation of Van Gogh's famous severed ear, both the irreducible singularity of the event and yet the possibility of its functioning within broader lawful configurations, while retaining its singularity there. (Van Gogh's ear is linked by Bataille to a cut off finger of another mutilator, Gaston F., embroidery designer, and Prometheus's famous liver, as part of a gigantic general-economic circulation.) But, as we have seen, it can only do so by allowing the deeper efficacity of this event to remain inaccessible and hence unexplainable. This circulation was initiated in a rather direct sense – 'the monstrous ear sent in its envelope', as, we might add, a *gift*, to Paul Gauguin – by Van Gogh himself, perhaps already aware (Duchamp certainly was) of this dynamic, at least in (as extending) the aesthetic domain.[29] Both gift and sacrifice, and their relationships, and the singularity of their event (one of Bataille's major concerns) or singularity of art, say, Van Gogh's painting of Gauguin's chair), all become shifted into a different circulation.[30] Both Van Gogh and Bataille would link these (as singular elements within a nonclassical organization) rather than, say, see the painting as anything governed by any form of, in de Man's terms, aesthetic ideology. (The painting itself needs to be rethought in terms of an analogous organization of singularities.) Van Gogh's ear belongs to and circulates in the global,

geopolitical, economy of the world. Bataille's analysis may help us to understand the nature of this belonging and of this circulation of, among other things, body parts, or of this economy. In *The Accursed Share* this – always untotalizable – globalization reaches the scale of the whole planet, ultimately more radically than in Deleuze and Guattari's analysis in *Anti-Oedipus*, itself indebted to Bataille.[31]

I conclude by returning to the fragmentary structure of Bataille's own text, which has been often commented upon and celebrated, but rarely understood. I would argue that the main reason for this is that the economy of organization here considered is not taken into account. At stake is not only the singularity and nonclassical cohesiveness of more conventionally fragmentary units, such as Nietzsche-like mini-essays or aphorisms, found throughout Bataille's text, but a more radical fragmentation or, in de Man's terms, dismemberment. According to de Man (who writes on Kant): 'to the dismemberment of the body *corresponds* a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters' [emphasis added].[32]

One, thus, encounters the workings of radical materiality, or/as singularity, both in the world and in the text. It would, however, be a mistake to see both as mirroring or mapping each other. Certainly, one should not view Bataille's mini-essays on the particular body parts as reflecting the fragmentation of the body, which, besides, must be seen in general-economic rather than simply fragmented terms. Instead, insofar as one wants or can approach the world by way of a text, the dismemberment or decoherence of language or of our conceptual formations manifests the irreducible inaccessibility of the 'world', or 'life', or the 'body' (if these words can apply). The original 'parts' or 'limbs' are, in de Man's terms, already allegories, derived from the classical view, and hence as supplementary as the (organized) body itself. A more radical dis-articulation, mutilation, disfiguration of the (un)body is at stake – at the level of effects. The efficacity of these effects is, again, inaccessible in any way, anymore by means of disarticulation than by means of articulation. Thus, nonclassical workings of fragmentary organization become enacted in Bataille's texts. On the one hand, there is a certain 'collective' or 'general' semantic field within which fragments, figures, and smaller linguistic or conceptual units function and which they obey. On the other hand, once rigorously considered individually, these units can no longer be fully, and indeed for the most part, subsumed by such a meaning or a coherent configuration of meanings. They begin to decohere in this sense and at the limit each acquires irreducible singularity. This decoherence defines the functioning of all key linguistic and conceptual units there. They, in their untotalizable totality, cannot be contained by classical structures of reading, which is not to say that their organization (or the organization of singularities within each fragment) has no meaning or cannot be read. Quite the contrary, their organization has rich and complex meaning and order, more meaning and order than any classical organization, or reading, is able to offer.

'This', to end with Blanchot, 'should therefore be impressed upon anyone who might read these pages thinking they are infused with unhappiness. And what is more, let him try to imagine the hand that is writing them: if he saw this hand, then perhaps

reading would become a serious task for him'.[33] Bataille's echoes: 'I do not dispute the factor of consciousness without which I would not be writing, but the hand that writes is *dying* and through its death in store evades the limits accepted as it writes (accepted by the writing hand, rejected by the dying hand).[34] This hand (either one), the hand of writing or of death (and they might be the same) is already severed from the body, just as, 'the monstrous ear [of Vincent Van Gogh] sent in its envelope', of which Bataille speaks. This ear, Bataille adds, 'brusquely leaves the magic circle where the rites of liberation [are] stupidly aborted. It leaves along with the tongue of Anaxarchus of Abdera, bit off and spat bloody in the face of the tyrant Nicocreon, and with the tongue of Zenon of Eleus, spat in the face of Demylos ... both of these philosophers having been subjected to atrocious tortures, the first crushed while still alive in a mortar'.[35] Let these tongues and these violent ends be imagined by anyone who thinks that philosophy, or literature, is an affair of the mind, rather than of the violence, including ethical and political, of the body, always already dismembered and put into a global, geopolitical, general-economic circulation. If they could see those tongues, then perhaps reading would become a serious task for them. Blanchot's, too, is the final(?) sentence, ultimately a severed, sacrificed fragment, excluded from the final(?) version, of the work entitled *L'Arrêt de Mort* – the death sentence, the radically, irreducibly material event of radical, irreducible singularity in life and writing.

Notes

[1] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis.: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.15. For the French originals of the works here cited see Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–1988) 12 vols.

[2] Bataille, G., *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* pp.15–16.

[3] I shall not explain quantum theory in detail here and permit myself to refer to my earlier works and references there, in particular, *Complementarity: Anti-epistemology After Bohr and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) and 'Techno-Atoms: The Ultimate Constituents of Matter and the Technological Constitution of Phenomena in Quantum Physics', *Tekhnema* 5 (1999). The literature on Bataille is considerable, and the sparse references to it in this essay, determined by the particular set of contexts it engages, could hardly do justice to it. I find both Maurice Blanchot's and Jacques Derrida's encounters with Bataille the best treatments of Bataille available, and I am indebted to both.

[4] Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991), p.9.

[5] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, Leslie Anne Boldt (trans.) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). *Guilty*, Bruce Boone (trans.) (New York: Lapis, 1988); *On Nietzsche*, Bruce Boone (trans.) (New York: Paragon, 1990).

[6] Following Heidegger and Derrida, ontotheology designates any form of determination, idealist or materialist, modeled on the theological determination in its positing a single agency, overt or hidden, which would govern nature, history, interpretation, and so forth.

[7] For Bohr's views see his essays in *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr*, 3 vols (Woodbridge: Ox Bow Press, 1987).

[8] Bataille, *Guilty*, p.46.

[9] Georges Bataille, 'Conférences sur le Non-Savoir', *Tel Quel 10* (1962):5. This sentence is omitted from the text published in 'Conférences 1951–1953'.

[10] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, p.219.

[11] This confluence may not be coincidental, even beyond the more general reasons indicated earlier. One of the figures involved in the discussion of Bataille's ideas in 'Conferences 1951–1953' was Georges Ambrosino, an atomic physicist, whom Bataille even credits with a partial co-authorship of the contemporary *Accursed Share (The Accursed Share: Volume 1*, Robert Hurley (trans.) [New York: Zone, 1988],p.191 n. 2).

[12] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, pp.567–68, 592.

[13] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, p.592.

[14] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p.103.

[15] Bataille, *Guilty*, p.76.

[16] Quantum mechanics does use a form of calculus of probabilities in making its predictions. However, in Bohr's interpretation, this usage reflects the unknowable and unknowledge analogous to those at stake in Bataille. That this calculus works under these conditions is enigmatic, and an epistemological justification of this usage may be impossible.
[17] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, pp.562–63, pp.564–67.
[18] Bataille, *Guilty*, pp.76–84.
[19] See especially 'Hegel, la mort, et le sacrifice', *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 12, pp.326–345.
[20] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp.215–16.
[21] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume 1* and *The Accursed Share: Volume 2 and Volume 3*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone, 1991); Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone, 1989).
[22] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Volume 1, p.12.
[23] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp.128–29.
[24] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vols. 2 and 3, p.315.
[25] Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, Peter Conor (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), p.205–7.
[26] G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield (eds) *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.303.
[27] Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.88.
[28] Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Mary Dalwood (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986) and *The Tears of Eros* further elucidate this point.
[29] Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.71.
[30] Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp.63–66.
[31] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Hurley *et al.* (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
[32] Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.89.
[33] Maurice Blanchot, *The Death Sentence*, Lydia Davis (trans.) (New York: Station Hill, 1978), p.81.
[34] Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.268 n.1; translation modified.
[35] Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.71.

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'Uuummmm, that's a tasty burger': Quentin Tarantino and the Consumption of Excess

Fred Botting and Scott Wilson

Consumption

Consumption usually has two senses: to use up, expend, exhaust, destroy or waste, but also to buy or purchase, to take up or take away something, the latter from the Latin *con-sumere*. The two senses perhaps come together in the modern (or hypermodern) experience of a shopping mall such as the one featured extensively in *Jackie Brown* that is advertised as 'the largest indoor mall in the world'.[1] The two senses come together not just because it is exhausting walking around the mall taking away and accumulating goods, but because the mall gives the impression of an exhaustive choice in the quantity and range of goods on offer. In the mall it is as if choice and consumption itself could be consumed and exhausted there. If there is any 'potlatch', in modern society it is the system of consumer capitalism that bestows it in the form of the overproduced luxury commodities that provide the sumptuous spectacle of consumption evident in the mall. Some New Right economists seem to have appreciated this and, in so far as they point to any form of commercial ethic at all, they perceive it in the general bounty bestowed by the excesses of consumer capitalism. Jean-Joseph Goux cites George Gilder, as an example of these right-wing economists:

> According to George Gilder, the heresy of the socialist economy, [is that] it begins with the postulation of demand assigned *a priori*, corresponding to an identifiable essence of need and to which a corresponding production could adequately respond. But the capitalist economy is founded on a metaphysical uncertainty regarding the object of human desire. It must create this desire through the invention of the new, the production of the unpredictable. It *supplies* in order to create desire, instead of satisfying a desire that would already be known by the person who experiences it. The preoccupation with demand leads to stagnation. The preoccupation with supply – in the gigantic *potlatch* of the capitalist store, which puts the unpredictable on display in order to seduce the potential buyer without coercion or certainty – is the 'genius of capitalism'.[2]

For George Gilder capitalism is marked by exuberance, risk and daring rather than servile accounting. Because of the uncertainty built into the speculative business of

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capitalism, its entrepreneurs have to adopt the strategies of artists and gamblers.[3] Gilder's entrepreneur is a heroic figure because he or she is willing to risk everything, and in succeeding, contribute to the general extravagance of consumer capitalism, maintaining freedom of choice. The freedom manifested by the heroism of the entrepreneur is reproduced, in a more prosaic way, by the consumer in the act of choosing one brand from another. Gilder's attempt to establish a 'postbourgeois' morality for capitalism supposes that the restricted, classically utilitarian economy characterized by thrift, industriousness, petty calculation and abstinence of the 'Protestant work ethic' has disappeared or become transformed. For sure, industry and production has not stopped, but it has become driven by consumption: it is good for the economy, necessary even, for consumers to consume to excess. It is the role of capitalism's geniuses to maximize that consumption, to produce greater desire, and as such produce lack, to produce a lack or want that did not exist before – the need for televisions, word processors or training shoes, for example. The 'restricted' economy of bourgeois capitalism has 'generalised' itself, then, but at the expense of any distinction between the restricted and the general, the useful and the luxurious, the rational and the ridiculous, the popularly banal and the sublime. As Goux asks, 'is it useful or superfluous to manufacture microwave ovens, quartz watches, video games, or collectively, to travel to the moon and Mars, to photograph Saturn's rings, etc.?'[4]

Since capitalism has to produce the desire to endlessly consume new products, regardless of their utility (their relative utility will have been determined retrospectively, on the condition that they are desired and bought), the distinction between the necessary and the superfluous disappears. Since distinctions arise only 'between several as yet unimagined possibilities ... seduction [and] the aestheticization of merchandise play a primordial role'.[5] But for capitalism to sustain desire, it must necessarily fail to satisfy it. Something must be withheld from the consumer in order for him or her to desire and seek to enjoy more. Often, it seems, that the Latin etymology of consume, 'to take away', functions in a reverse sense with regard to consumer capitalism: commodities steal something from the consumer. For Marx, this is because of the vampiric system of Capital itself. In *Capital*, Marx writes, 'capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks'.[6] Confounding the living and the dead, capital seeks to establish value, not in life or things, but only in terms of the things relating to money and exchange, that is, in the shadowy form of the commodity. For the Marxist and German Critical Theory tradition, commodity 'fetishism' sucks out the humanity from the consumer. Commodity fetishism drains consumers of their sense of human inter-relatedness and transforms them into the un-living and un-dead things they would consume. Commodification is seen as part of a general process of reification which involves a loss of an essential humanity or the loss, at least, of an historical, organic culture. Correlatively, this subtraction is often accompanied by an addition: something is added to commodities even as they are seen to lack something: food is adulterated, chemically enhanced, rendered tasteless or poisoned through the addition of nonfoods, additives and artificial colouring. The history of consumption is marked, then, by the theft of an essential ingredient: humanity, organicism, taste, health.

Jean Baudrillard debunks the 'superstitious' attitude that informs the Marxist account of fetishism. For Baudrillard this account is flawed because it assumes a pre-fetishistic 'conscious subject', a 'human essence' outside commodification and ultimately privileges a 'rationalist metaphysics'.[7] But what commodity fetishism also discloses is 'a generalized code of signs, a totally arbitrary code of difference'.[8] Fetishism, which amounts to a 'fetishism of the signifier', thus attempts to stabilize value and the system of signification in the phantasmatic space disclosed by the commodity, a signifier in place of any Thing that would embody jouissance or the satisfaction of desire. A fetishism of the signifier necessarily sets desire on a track that takes it beyond the pleasure principle. For Lacan, desire is always addressed to another desire, the desire of the Other which, in this case would be the system of signification, the little differences, that articulate desire and enables consumer choice, the locus of consumption. Consumer desire is an effect of, even as it is determined and de-limited by, a process of consumption that it wishes to go beyond. For Lacan, 'desire ... finds its boundary, its strict relation, its limit ... crossing the threshold imposed by the pleasure principle'.[9] Beyond the pleasures offered by objects of consumption that are all-to-quickly rendered over-familiar by mass marketing and mass consumption, desire aims for something more, directed as it is by the point of uncertainty of the Other's desire. This uncertainty, of course, concerns the essential question of choice. Faced with an array of different beans, burgers, word processors, training shoes or movies, which one should I choose? Which one is the most prestigious, the most useful, the most valuable? Which one is the most 'me'? Which one holds the key to my most intimate enjoyment? The Other, as locus of signification, is 'grounded' upon a point of absolute alterity, or un-knowing, that renders desire interminable, insatiable and eccentric. The big Other, then, in the form of the system of consumer capitalism, gives with one hand, only to take away some thing essential, some surplus jouissance (or *plus de jouir*) along with the surplus value.

For Lacan, in his analysis of classical bourgeois capitalism in *L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, it is because the *plus de jouir* does not circulate that capitalism remains a discourse of the master.[10] Bourgeois mastery, self-mastery, autonomy, individualism and so on is located in those luxury commodities, bought at the expense of labour, that signify a jouissance that is at once heterogeneous yet essential to labour. In relation to capital, labour is the Thing that suffers in the real. Unfortunately, being heterogeneous to the labour that produced the wealth to buy them, the jouissance promised by the luxury commodities is endlessly deferred down the signifying chain, the system of differences in which the meaning of luxury is signified. Jouissance is again spirited away, or withheld by the big Other, the locus of signification. For Lacan, it is because 'our jouissance' goes 'off track', in this way, that 'only the Other is able to mark its position', precisely because 'we are separated from this Other'.[11]

We are separated from our jouissance, then, by the law of capitalist economy that holds together even as it separates the pleasures of consumption from the consumption (consummation) of pleasure, since the latter would leave one without any resources to consume more, with nothing left to consume. As Lacan argues, 'you can enjoy (*jouir de*) your means, but must not waste them. When you have the usufruct of an inheritance, you can enjoy the inheritance (*en jouir*) as long as you don't use up too much of it. That is clearly the essence of law – to divide up, distribute, or

reattribute everything that counts as jouissance'.[12] In contrast, jouissance stands as the 'negative instance' of this economic mode of enjoyment: 'Jouissance is what serves no purpose (*ne sert à rien*)'.[13] In the capitalist system that which, as excess or surplus, is put to work in order to return a profit corresponds to the function of Thing and paternal signifier: what suffers in the real finds direction and value in the system of signifying circulation: the loss of things returns as value, relocated in a system of symbolic exchange. But when the reserve is squandered in a process of spending, as with consumer capitalism, jouissance follows a general economic principle of consumption: things and energies are used up, wasted, apparently in a purposeless fashion, or to no end other than to consume more. The Thing, then, the locus for the erection and dissolution of signifiers, site of loss and (sacred) value, is a point of double articulation: the excess that, as reserve, uncertainly founds systems of exchange, meaning, desire and value, and that which exceeds them.

As Lacan further argues, this economic relationship encompasses the world of sexual difference: 'a man is nothing but a signifier. A woman seeks out a man qua signifier. A man seeks out a woman qua – and this will strike you as odd – that which can only be situated through discourse, since ... woman is not whole – there is always something in her that escapes discourse'.[14] Not whole or not all, as both lacking and in excess of signifying systems, woman is also more than signification: an excess included but excluded, site of extimacy and strangeness, positioned, as objet *a* or the Thing that lies in excess of signification. As such, woman is also attributed with the 'jouissance of the Other', the inordinate jouissance that lies in excess of the phallus and the phallocratic symbolic order, but in relation to which its desiring economy is geared. In fact, we could say that the phallocratic desiring economy is itself addressed to the question posed by the Other's jouissance, and that it is driven by its attempts to fill the gap posed by its enigma.

> Jouissance – jouissance of the Other's body – remains a question, because the answer it may constitute is not necessary. We can take this further still: it is not a sufficient answer either because love demands love. It never stops (*ne cesse pas*) demanding it. It demands it ... *encore*. '*Encore*' is the proper name of the gap (*faille*) in the Other from which the demand for love stems.[15]

The demand for love is insatiable, and it demands more and more tokens, more and more objects to fill it. The desiring subject confronts, from the Other, a generalized demand for more objects of enjoyment, more objects that, in the act of consumption, enjoin the transgression and re-establishment of limits, a pulsation of expenditure that returns the subject, thrilled with the coming of an instant of plenitude, to a pleasurable equilibrium governed by the paternal signifier.[16] But the Other still wants more, demands more love, more objects and compels the subject, guiltily, to enjoy more. As Lacan argues, 'the superego is the imperative of jouissance – Enjoy'.[17]

For Jean-Joseph Goux, among others, one of the features of postmodernity is the calling into question of 'imaginary signifiers of *paternity*' and the redundancy of 'metasocial guarantees' in the face of an unanchored and deregulated economy.[18] Useless consumption and luxurious expenditure come to the fore when the

frameworks of paternal morality, rational use and human need no longer apply, washed away by the mobile, fluctuating and inhuman mechanisms of capitalism and a mode of consumption based on the uncertainty – and profitability – of human want and desire. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, postmodern capitalism, detached from any paternal anchor, evinces only the superegoic imperative to enjoy: jettisoning the master (king, law or state) that used to regulate the inherent excesses of capitalism, the consumer is urged to enjoy more since in consuming more and more we become enmeshed in the 'vicious cycle of a desire whose apparent satisfaction only widens the gap of its dissatisfaction'.[19] More then requires more, and so on. In this situation, where desire is privileged rather than objects, goods, or symbols, aesthetics is barely distinguishable from any other form of activity. Desire, marked by the accumulations and losses of processes and movements of exchange (money, signifiers, images) finds itself reduced, like art, to an economic sphere. For Jean-François Lyotard, this is precisely what happens with postmodern eclecticism, where one encounters 'the degree zero of contemporary general culture' in the indulgence of any variety of tastes, fashions and aesthetic objects. The 'anything goes' of such eclecticism, however, is dominated only by money: moral, rational or aesthetic values are irrelevant.[20] The impossibility of any legitimate or authoritative mode of judgment, of course, is an effect of the general 'incredulity towards metanarratives', an incredulity, in Goux's terms, which also affects social investments in a paternal function. And without the function that, though based on lack, directs desiring, the position of the subject is also transformed: desire is opened up to a voracious want that is the norm of consumer culture. The result is that ' "lack" is not only circulated but is actively sought out and produced by any body, masculine or feminine identified'.[21] Feminine jouissance, rather than pleasure, becomes the principle of this generalized economy, unwinding in an economy beyond the phallus. In place of the phallus, then, it is the excessive Thing, that which is located beyond the system of exchange once regulated by the phallus, which becomes the uncertain ground of desire and the law of consumption. 'I can only know the Thing by means of the law', says Lacan,[22] but the law by which the Thing might be known, approached or painfully experienced has changed. This (internalized) law is marked more by a superegoic enjoinment to enjoy and consume objects and images than by prohibition. The Thing haunts and inhabits the object in the form of the image or commodity that is no longer reducible to a part object according to a logic of prohibition and castration. For sure, lack is continually simulated and produced in order to generate an unlimited number of 'transgressive' images that, precisely because there is no limit to them, cross no boundary or taboo, and therefore do not transgress anything.

In this essay, we do not propose, in the spirit of left-wing anti-capitalism, to take, recommend or offer a critical position outside of consumer capitalism, as if that were possible. Nor are we, in drawing attention to the withering of signifiers of paternity, calling for their re-erection. Consumer capitalism may be post-oedipal and post-paternal, but rather like the term post-modern, this means that the space it inhabits remains shaped by the remnants, remains and excess of a modernity that it has hyped, virtualized and accelerated. In order to negotiate and even contest the manifestly (and necessarily) unsatisfying system of commodity capitalism however, we propose, in place of the Name-of-the-Father, a symptomatology in which a certain configuration of commodity-signs come together to open up different possibilities for

consuming-producing-expending than those determined by the market or by hierarchized systems of value, and in so doing also provide an implicit critique. The particular symptomatology we will be discussing is Quentin Tarantino.

The term 'symptomatology' comes from Gilles Deleuze for whom the name of an author (or auteur) does not denote or delimit an *Oeuvre* (for which its owner is the origin and end of meaning, as with a poet, say). Nor does it denote the location and principle of limitation of a discourse (as with Marx or Freud, say). Rather, authors are like 'diagnosticians or symptomatologists'.[23] Just as a particular illness is given the name of the doctor who diagnosed or characterized it, so authors give their names to a set of signs or symptoms that have been disassociated from their previous grouping and been rearranged into another configuration until 'a profoundly original clinical picture' is built up.[24] The specific literary-clinical examples Deleuze gives are Nietzsche, Sade and Sacher-Masoch, but there need not be any explicit, conventionally clinical or pathological dimension. While 'Sadean' connotes a particular grouping of signs with its own history that is, for Deleuze, linked to the history of literary 'symptomatology', the term 'Tarantinian' could be described as connoting a grouping of cinematic signs and samples linked to a history (or set of video archives) of cinematic symptomatologies. But the term 'Tarantinian' also itself functions as a product, a 'symptom-commodity'. The term 'Tarantinian' connotes a set of self-authorizing signs, sampled from elsewhere, brought together as a 'movie-symptom', but as such it is also a product or a symptom that is popularly desired, consumed, re-produced and re-configured. This is not just because other products either tangentially linked with Tarantino or seemingly, in their desire and imitation, addressed to him, become marketed as 'Tarantinian'. It is, more profoundly, because the term can be used to describe a particular mode of consuming-producing-expending that takes, as its limit or the boundary it wishes to cross, the system of consumer or commodity capitalism within which it operates. Already marked by astonishing self-pleasuring excess, this system (which could not be better exemplified than by Hollywood) is traversed by a 'Tarantinian' excess that is prepared, with sovereign laughter, to look horror, violence and non-knowing in the face.

To illustrate this, we propose to look briefly at two screenplays that seem to us to attempt both to exceed and to contest consumer capitalism.[25] One response to what we call consumer capitalism's 'excess of the same' is to push it further towards an excess of the excess of the same and, by exhausting the limit of the possible, open such a symptomatology on to an ethical relation with the impossible. But, as *Natural Born Killers* shows supremely, this is to risk psychosis. Or rather it is to risk giving oneself up to the generalized psychosis that already characterizes the postmodern condition of consumer capitalism. In conventional Lacanian terms, 'psychosis' is defined as the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality; it involves foreclosure from the name-of-the-father – the signifier of identity and law that articulates, for the subject, the system of differences that constitute the conventional world of symbolized reality. In place of the paternal metaphor, psychosis substitutes a 'delusional metaphor' or indeed a 'swarm of images' that reorganize the symbolic order, that set up another world alongside the conventional one, or replaces it. It is the world of Mr. Blonde or Richard Gecko that is foreclosed from the world of 'professionals' who share the same conception of reality, the same set of priorities

and the same code of acceptable behaviour. But it is not violence that is crucial to the 'psychosis' that is *generally* characteristic of postmodern culture, it is romance.

Romance has played a defining role in the extensive re-configuration of symbolized reality by the cinema and television screen both in the screen's relationship with its audience and in the many romantic images generated by cinema and television that are commented upon endlessly in Tarantino's screenplays. Through romance, psychosis appears to have moved beyond an individual psychic disintegration and become a determining part of late twentieth-century culture. Psychosis, bound up with the production and consumption of a swarm of images, emerges as a primary cultural phenomenon. Romanticized screen images, flickering figures of attraction and desire, replace the actual figures guaranteed by the symbolic with an array of ideal egos which are consumed by and consume all subjects. Plural, diverse and irreconcilable images of identity fill the void left by the absence of a single recognized figure; they exceed the regulation of a single figure as they replace its function of conferring identity. The absence of a unifying, organizing symbolic figure, the phallus, is thus not a matter of individual delusion but a cultural condition in which the multiplicity of images replace, reconstitute and disintegrate what might once have been called culture in the singular.

Romance

Romance institutes a law of excess that comes of a demand of, and an uncertainty towards, the Other's desire, an inability to know, or live up to what the Other, in the form of the woman, wants. This demand and uncertainty produces a passion for an absolutely singular figure to fill that gap – someone like Elvis, say, – which in turn generates a host of images to fill the void in the symbolic fabric rent by that demand: a host of Elvises, a host of Brandos, Jimmie Deans, Marilyns, Mansons. But while Clarence in *True Romance* reaches his ideal point, becoming as cool as Elvis through being shot as dead as Elvis, Mickey and Mallory in *Natural Born Killers* shatter these fatally romantic limits on a cultural scale as they separate true romance from its pervasively banal Hollywood counterpart. The distinction is highlighted by the inclusion of a film, a conventionally romanticized version of the lives of Mickey and Mallory, within *Natural Born Killers*. Following the romanticization of them on other screens, *Thrill Killers* interprets Mickey and Mallory in the traditional terms of romance, the director, Neil Pope, rewriting their lives in accordance with a properly operatic, Wagnerian form which calls for love's ultimate sacrifice to the other, Mallory's suicide, so that Mickey might live. But while the high cultural, 'Wagnerian', reading is underscored in the interviews with the film's director, both the title and the reasons for their romantic excess suggests a more banal explanation that situates their romance within popular culture. High culture has already been absorbed into the popular sphere: true romance, so Clarence suggests in *True Romance*, is found not in unwatchable films or unreadable books, but in *movies*, in comic books, pulp fiction and pop songs. True romance, it appears, is consumed in sufficient quantities to make it as much a part of the popular diet as burgers. Romance, far from being extrinsic to everyday life, is very much within it, assimilating and replacing conventional symbolic codes, to the point of being the pre-immanent form of cultural

consumption. Without regulation by a singular law, a romantic passion for death glitters across a million images of dead celebrities, dead lovers, that unfold across the void torn in the symbolic. The law of image-excess is an effect of a passion for, and of, a void that cannot be filled, as Lacan implies when he observes that the darkened cinema retains a courtly structure in which the cinematic image, its romance, becomes the 'in me more than you', the determining object of love's passion.

Thrill Killers conventionally supposes that romance is consumed as if it were a reflection of everyday, American life. The turning point of Mickey's life is presented as the apotheosis of the American way, the point at which he renounces alienated production and the deferral proper to the Puritan work-ethic to demand instant satisfaction in the immediate consumption of the commodity. Significantly his workplace, in the service sector, is at the intersection of productive and consumerist modes of the economy; it is his job to produce so that others may consume. Mickey, in the movie within the movie, works in a fast-food outlet flipping and selling burgers. For the Hollywood romance, this mundane economic reality determines his leap into the American dream. His complaint is formed in the image of the romantic escape:

MOVIE MICKEY

> I'm gettin' off this minimum wage train. Break my back for you and throw away my youth for nothing. When I'm thirty, have a big wall drop down in front of me called the future. Realize I've been doing time in a burger flippin' jail.
>
> *He rips off his uniform.*
>
> Listen to me, Jimmy-dick, I want cash, lots of it, cars, fast cars! And I want it now! Not later, now! I wanna wail, baby, wail![26]

Mickey's escape from 'burger jail' is motivated by commodified desire, the want that must be satisfied immediately, the gratification that is due to him now, not later. He makes the leap from work's life sentence of endlessly deferred desire to the imagined freedom and luxury of consumption in which cash and cars are the symbols of enjoyment. The overcoming of wage slavery in the fantasy image of luxurious consumption replicates the structure of romance, of course, in which the satisfaction of desire is imagined in the erotic consumption of, or passionate fusion with, the desired object. Such satisfaction ought, conventionally, to be worked for or courted, it should not be violently demanded and taken. Yet Mickey short-circuits the fantasy in a thrillingly passionate and violent enunciation of want. In *Thrill Killers*, romantic and economic desire remains captivated by the images of its instant *promise* of gratification (fast cars can get me some place *quickly*; cash can buy me some stuff *soon*), but they still leave hanging the exact nature of the object of ultimate enjoyment, just as the standard romance usually substitutes an ellipsis for the consummation of desire, words naturally failing to do justice to the absence of a sexual relation.

At the burger joint, romance and the reality principle flip over like burgers on a hot griddle. The breathless speed of passionate romance is replicated not only in the

breathless delivery and consumption of the fast food itself, but in Mickey's passionate demand for the vehicles of desire's satisfaction. Charged with the erotic force of want and the image, the romanticization of the commodity infuses desire with the passion of the signifier, but also discloses a gap that motivates and prevents closure. In the process romance and consumer economy display the same structure, commanding an enjoyment so full that it can only be excessive and impossible. The structure of want is stated in the documentary, performed by Mickey as the lovers rob a *7-Eleven* store: 'Money! Money! Money! Fast! Fast! Faster! Faster! Faster than that!'[27] Acquisitive to the point of being insatiable, the demand for more can only be reiterated to infinity. More never comes quickly enough, just as it never arrives; satisfaction, depending on deferral and the working towards one's object that is symbolic desire, can never be apprehended even as they seem to approach it with increasing velocity. Immediate yet still driven by a gap, satisfaction is never satisfying enough, desire remains and the demand for more never seems to exhaust itself in an incremental, exponential increase in urgency. The consumption of desire which exhausts images and objects in a relentless call for more, quickly, leaves something over, some thing not contained in the object or the image. That desire requires a constant escalation of objects and images to fuel desire, however, is manifested in the title of the film and in the documentary.

Thrill Killers, with its emphasis on the thrills of killing for pleasure, killing to satisfy a desire rather than serve another, economic self-interest, accords with the explanation of Mickey and Mallory's move from robbery to domestic murder: 'apparently bored with banditry and murder, the two outlaws proved what renaissance psychopaths they really were. To break up the monotony in between bank jobs, or what have you, they started butchering whole households at random'.[28] The monotony between bank jobs is of course also the monotony *of* bank jobs, the boredom that signals banditry become routine banality. Desire recurs even as it is suppressed in repetition, exhausting itself by replaying itself, effacing the difference and alterity by which the gap, the want exposes the object to desire. In order to be stimulated, desire must overcome the impediment that sustains it, thus destroying and completing itself by turning what was other and exciting into the same and boring. Desire, repetitively, requires something new, some novel challenge or barrier. Mickey and Mallory's romance follows this pattern. It depends on the impediments it wants to destroy (like, quite conventionally, their parents) and through the overcoming of them must seek out new objects and limits to be transgressed, thus invigorating passion. But the escalation and speed of passion repeatedly discloses an Other that is not reducible to perishable persons, objects or images. Passion, as it attempts to transcend every limit, transgress every law, discloses a gap, a void that calls for the passionate consumption of more objects to fill, kill and complete it. That is to say, it calls for the invigoration of the illusion of passionate fulfillment with the enjoyment of more and more thrills to stave the always encroaching spectre of boredom.

Boredom and thrills thus constitute the twin peaks that sustain passion's consumptive relation of same and other. The want of more and more thrills thus impels both a saturation of, and an excessive demand for, new objects and images of desire, a desire produced in, but located ever beyond, symbolic exchange. The search for

thrills moves ever outwards from the same only to return to it, following the laws of romance that ironically enjoin an excess beyond possibility. The condensation of romantic passion and consumer desire in Mickey's burger joint expostulation signals a flattening out of symbolic and economic structures: both run in accordance with the logic of the romantic image, burgers and screens presenting their locus of identity as the excess of the same, their absolute absorption into the degree zero of image consumption. In *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent's delightful cultural criticism of burger retailing delivers an analysis in which the 'same shit' of globalized consumption and exchange is rendered consumable by means of little differences. The 'same shit' describes the excess of the same in the image of global capitalism as it highlights the little differences that mark national variations but only under the branded stamp of the 'same shit' that is both over there and here. Identity and difference are consumed by the same, incorporated into a global system in which difference only preserves the illusions of cultural identity through little differences, differences which, at the same time, only provide the desire of the same with new objects of consumption.

The excess of the same that demands more little differences to consume turns the images of transnational capitalism into the universal currency, the zero degree of symbolic exchange. The 'same shit' constitutes the recognisability of Mickey and Mallory as universal romantic figures and heightens the visibility of the little differences in cross-cultural burger retail. The image, indeed, becomes the pure form of this generalized economic mode, indifferent from and to anything else, unregulated by an order other than its own, internally generated, command of excess. Absorbing all signification and consuming any transcendental signified that might impersonate external regulation, consumer capitalism knows no limits and no master. The system of signification, no longer regulated by a master signifier, eschews structural imbalance to follow the rule of excess. Romantic images, replaying a consumptive passion for transcendence, the drive towards a unity beyond difference and separation, towards an overcoming of the structural imbalance that impels passion in the first place, are bound up with the vicious circle of superegoic paradox, dependent on an order of prohibitions whose function is purely to enjoin transgression. The realization of romance never delivers closure, however, never fills the gap that motivates passion, but only demands that it look and move elsewhere. Romance, indeed, occurs at the very point of capitalist imbalance. The correspondence of romance and consumer economy in *Natural Born Killers* discloses a link identifiable since the emergence of modernity, in its liberal and bourgeois form, in the eighteenth century. Antithetical to the rationality and morality of Enlightenment codes, the romantic revival was imagined as the excess that could not be countenanced. The criticism of the 'modern' romance in the eighteenth century was thoroughly economic in its interests, informed by the pervasive Protestant ethic of conservation, use and regulated work. In the new and expanding market for fiction, the spectre of the monstrous consumer appalled the critical establishment: fiction would corrupt undisciplined readers, turn imaginations and desires beyond the paternal regulation of family and society, destroy, in a revolutionary torrent, the very basis of social order. The sublime threat of romantic fiction stemmed from its flagrant refusal to serve useful moral, rational or aesthetic ends: it did not imitate the ideals of social unity; it refused to distinguish between virtue and vice and encouraged licentious desire. In contrast to the didactic, paternal preservation of a

social order based on usefulness, production and purposeful control, romantic fiction, consumed by leisured readers, was construed in terms of idleness, luxurious expenditure, of imaginative energy and time, pleasure and sensuous gratification. Moral and rational criticism thus identified the excess in terms of absolutely useless, unproductive expenditure: a consumption of nothing that resulted from the production of nothing but fanciful stories, metaphors and images that reproduced at an alarming rate, fuelling a market that, before then, did not exist. The emergence and popularity of romance draws out a fundamental imbalance in the regulation of capitalist modes of production: that consumption, surplus value and profit remain integral to the process even as work, discipline and alienation are privileged in the efficient production of goods. From the twentieth century, when the leisure and entertainment industries has occupied a much more dominant place in the making and filling of excessive desires, romance becomes the norm.

Natural Born Killers brings sharply into focus how far Western society's romanticization of 'trash', and capitalism's imperative of instant enjoyment, has become ideologically valued over the ethic of self-interested, but rational deferral implied in work predicated on either an individual or generalized notion of the good. In the movie itself Mickey and Mallory, and their celebrity, are repeatedly perceived by institutions of law, medicine and media as the apotheosis of this cultural logic, an unavoidable sign of just how fucked up the system is, as McClusky says. Their presence impeaches and challenges the power of all regulative institutions to deal with excess.

On the screens that determine them and their excesses, they come to embody the very excess of the same, evoking the general psychosis and hysterical identifications of junk culture, generating a romanticization without reserve on a universal level that is manifested in the mania, fever and fanaticism of their audience. The intensity of popular identification remains the most striking feature of *Natural Born Killers*' reading of contemporary culture, presenting consumer capitalism with an excess it can only reproduce rather than consume. For Žižek, 'the fear of "excessive" identification is therefore the fundamental feature of the late-capitalist ideology: the Enemy is the "fanatic" who "overidentifies" instead of maintaining a proper distance toward the dispersed plurality of subject-positions'.[29] Fanatical identification is tied to a singular idealized image, eschewing all others and thus foregoing the range of commodifiable subject-positions. As in romance, such identification manifests a passion for the absolute, for the erasure of all distance, for becoming one's beloved image. Fanaticism depends on passionate identification, an absorption by one image at the expense of all others. While Clarence achieves his ambition to be recognized by his ideal at the price of actual disappearance, Mickey and Mallory literalize this passion for each other, becoming each other's fanatics, and, at the same time, present a gift to the Other.

For the Other, in the form of the mediatized, image-dense world of consumptive romance, their gift is romantic excess: they remain utterly romantic even for a culture already saturated with images of romance. Their passion, their excesses, their overidentification with an image in and yet more than each other, shocks a system already used to excess, already numb with violence. Their excess, their gift of love to the Other, appears as the excess of the excess of the same. While defined

romantically, they are situated beyond the pervasive banality of romance; as fast living, fast food junk culture junkies, they take consumer capitalism's imperative to enjoy to excess. They are, for the director of *Thrill Killers*, echoing the French criticism of Roger Corman's films that stands as the epigraph to Tarantino's own *True Romance*, 'a flower that could only bloom amidst a grotesque fast-food culture'.[30] A flower of romance that grows from the manure, the 'same shit', of junk culture, they become the impossible excess in and beyond consumption's excess of the same. The consumption of junk culture, they consume it to the point of its excess, a consumption which takes the form of that culture's expenditure, beyond its orders, through and against it, towards an impossible, romanticized outside.

Horror

A mythical 'outside' to the system of consumer capitalism figures significantly in two of Tarantino's screenplays, one of his first and the latest at the time of writing. In *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *Jackie Brown*, that 'outside' is examined in diametrically opposed, but related ways. Speaking of the plot of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, a screenplay eventually directed by Robert Rodriguez, Tarantino said, 'Where they're going to is the place where the characters in *The Getaway* (Jim Thompson) are going, this mythical place called El Rey. When there's no where else to go, you go to El Rey. And that's where the Gecko brothers are going to'.[31] *From Dusk Till Dawn* begins in a similar way to *Natural Born Killers*, depicting a romantic couple pushing the boundaries of excess all the way to El Rey, though here 'instead of two lovers, its two brothers in love'.[32] But though the Gecko boys make it across the border, they don't end up in El Rey, they don't get to sip any margaritas by the pool. Instead, they wind up in an altogether different place that is both too close to home and altogether Other. Similarly, Ordell Robbie, *Jackie Brown's* gun-running criminal, has a pot of gold stashed somewhere over the rainbow in Mexico. His task is to get it back so that he can unwind in his own personal El Rey in California, to spend the rest of his life spending. However, this dream of escape into a world of easy and lavish consumption is quickly disclosed as the very nightmare from which there is no escape. Consequently, both movies switch from the genre of the romance to horror in surprising ways.

From Dusk Till Dawn presents the unwinding of the symbolic order and the reality that it renders comprehensible. The master signifier and its im/material phantasmatic support decompose in spectral figures threatening subjective and bodily integrity, disclosing a horror at the centre of things. Maternal absence, paternal decline, sibling frustration, for all the movie's emphasis on familial structures and bonds, come to disclose the failure of a bourgeois family romance, a failure symptomatic of wider social and sexual disintegration. Oedipus no longer provides the structuring principle of subjective and social desire, and hasn't for a long time; the father no longer lays down the law, his authority being superseded by the very Thing that once sustained the force of his word.

A preacher who has lost his faith and his two teenage children get hijacked by two brothers on the run. Using the Fullers family Winnebago as a cover, they make it

across to their rendezvous in Mexico, a sleazy strip joint and bordello named the Titty Twister. Immediately, Seth, one of the brothers, voices his frustration and disappointment – not at the attractions on offer, but at the quality of service he gets: 'That's just fuckin' typical. Biggest number one problem with Mexico, it's not service-oriented. I was feelin' so good, and those fuckin' spics brought me down'.[33] In contrast to bars and diners north of the border, like Jack Rabbit Slims, the bar in *Pulp Fiction* that Vincent Vega wanders around in an idyllic, heroin-soaked haze, where the waiters and waitresses are Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Mamie Van Doren, Zorro, James Dean, Donna Reed, Martin and Lewis, Buddy Holly, whose catch lines and phrases sell steaks and burgers – 'Hi! I'm Buddy, pleasing you, pleases me', the Titty Twister's host is a mean, ill-humoured Mexican called Razor Charlie. Unlike US customers, then, urged by their waiters and waitresses to 'have a nice day' and 'enjoy' their food, the position of enjoyment is here reversed, and in some style. In short order, the bar is quickly divided between the staff who turn into vampires and the patrons who become their prey. The visitors from the US are there to be fed upon rather than fed. 'Dinner is served!' is the call that inaugurates the first vampire attack as the consumers begin to be consumed. While the concern about Mexican service acknowledges an anxiety about 'wetbacks' crossing the border to serve US citizens as cheap labour, the reversal enacted in the Titty Twister opens the economic question of service and exploitation: who is feeding upon whom? Taking jobs, lowering wages, transforming cities and cultures, the cheap Mexican labour employed in menial tasks from work on the land, in sweatshops and rich homes, underpins a consumer economy with a large, illegal and highly exploitable reserve with no rights or organization. From one perspective, then, Mexican labour becomes a spectre of an 'Other Enjoyment', an excess that generates and focuses internal hostility and antagonism. But the problem of the Other's enjoyment is a spectral effect of the excesses of American capitalism itself. Mexico, though the other side of the border, remains too close to home, particularly in economic terms. In the form of the Titty Twister, for all the poor service, the mode of enjoyment, of consumption, retains an unbearable – and hence vampiric – proximity to the contemporary American way of life.

Before entering the place to enjoy rot-gut and strip shows, the excess is loudly proclaimed by a seedy salesman with a megaphone in the parking lot:

> Pussy, pussy, pussy! All pussy must go. At the Titty Twister we're slashing pussy in half! This is a pussy blow out! Make us an offer on our vast selection of pussy! We got white pussy, black pussy, Spanish pussy, yellow pussy, hot pussy, cold pussy, wet pussy, tight pussy, big pussy, bloody pussy, fat pussy, hairy pussy, smelly pussy, velvet pussy, silk pussy, Naugahyde pussy, snappin' pussy, horse pussy, dog pussy, mule pussy, fake pussy! If we don't have it, you don't want it![34]

'A list as sleazy as it is exhaustive',[35] the sales pitch could of course be for anything, since anything is subject to the law of the commodity. Advertised as a discount delicatessen, an emporium of endless expenditure, the Titty Twister, despite its

specialty marketing, is no different from the shopping mall or supermarket. 'If we don't have it, you don't want it!' In a world of overabundance, of luxury goods reduced to bargain basement prices, the only limit is the consumer's desire: like any other commodity, sex, the difference or gap which functions as desire's cause, is readily marketable and accessible, an instant availability and immediate satisfaction of wants to the point of – and beyond – saturation. Like the commodity, which promises the satisfaction or gratification of an obscure desire, the Titty Twister's sales pitch offers a range of goods wide enough to fill any consumer's taste. But the invitation is a lure: offering as many consumer objects as are enough to sate any appetite, it declares that any (male) fantasy can be fulfilled, the images of abundance calling up their opposite and condition – the lack constitutive of desire. Drawing upon the assumption of male privilege in a symbolic economy in which women exist as objects of exchange between men, the sales pitch activates lack/desire, stimulating its phantasmatic support.

What is on sale, however, exceeds the fantasy of male mastery and plenitude: the overabundance of female objects becomes a threat, the object turning into a Thing of horror beyond fantasised plenitude. (Viewing) pleasure is transformed into unbearable enjoyment in the feminine spectres of a jouissance that exceeds a limited economy of desire. The consumer finds himself subjected to, rather than master of, an order over which he has no control and by which he is consumed, quite literally in the case of *From Dusk to Dawn*. The feast is begun by the main attraction, a femme-fatal erotic dancer called Santanico Pandemonium. Having consumed Richard Gecko, Santanico turns to his brother Seth and promises to deliver him also to a new order of servile consumption:

> I'm not going to drain you completely. You're gonna turn for me. You'll be my slave. You'll live for me. You'll eat bugs because I order it. Because I don't think you're worthy of human blood, you'll feed on the blood of stray dogs. You'll be my foot stool. And at my command, you'll lick the dog shit from my boot heels ... Welcome to slavery.[36]

An old masochistic fantasy of subjection to a dominating femme fatale becomes the perverse rule of consumption, with its table of valuable and edible commodities an index of worth. The threat of being relegated to the more wretched levels of consumer life, in which human consumption stands at the apex of consumable being, renders vampirism the standard and norm. Undeath, rather than life or death, confounds any conventional system of differences. The inverted, yet same, order of the consumer and service economy manifests itself so that in the limitless sphere of consumption, desire and horror, luxury and abjection, mastery and servility become indistinguishable. Where 'vampire' is a term designating Mickey Knox's monstrosity and excess as an ultimate, quasi-sacred point of in/humanity in *Natural Born Killers*, *From Dusk Till Dawn* deploys it as a basic category of the contemporary consumer. The mastery and satisfaction promised by the general commodification of goods is inverted or flattened-out: plenitude is the same as deficiency, excess the same as deprivation.

Pussy, pussy, pussy. *From Dusk Till Dawn* veils and parades the lack constitutive of desire, filling the space of horror with feminized images of consumption and evacuating, in laughter, the position of the paternal metaphor. 'Daddy's dead', the preacher himself is consumed and becomes resurrected as a vampire. Beyond the scope of paternal care, desires dance like vampires around undead objects *a*. The movie recalls the spectres of an a-paternal consumption from other films – oral gratification, foot fetishism, pussy-eating – to associate consumption with a traditionally feminine form of subjectivity and to signal it has become nothing less than the norm. The gap of fullness and horror becomes the site of (dis)satisfaction and repeated consumption. The frenzy of feeding, violence and bloodletting that ensues after Santanico's transformation presents a scene in which the trajectory of consumer society is taken to its own inherent excess. Plenitude becomes an overabundance whose unregulated excesses respect no bounds of reason, morality, taste or genre, to the extent that boundaries themselves become anachronisms. Enjoy is the superegoic imperative dripping from bloodstained lips as those who expect to be served find themselves on the menu. The grotesque spectacle of uninhibited consumption, the excessive enjoyment inherent in consumer society, takes over as the determining and horrifying course of the movie, which has left its realistic frames behind. The consumer is turned into a vampire, demanding more, its desires and responses re-wired by 'a plethora of state-of-the-screen transformations and resurrections'.[37] The rapid pulsation of attraction and repulsion, desire and repugnance follows the pattern of the horror genre itself, as a genre about genre, to become a movie that is purely about the technological production of affects and the vampiric effects of technology.

Technology

From Dusk Till Dawn moves from romance to sex to horror to the comedy-horror of state-of-the-screen special effects eventually leaving the spectator behind. The sublime object of fantastically fatal femininity, 'a siren who lures men to their doom', takes the masquerade and the fantasy it supports into the superficial space of special effects and comic expenditure. The lack that the fetish object normally veils remains as visible as the fleeting phallic image, the void flickering with horror. Femininity, its masquerade, functions merely as a lure, an image-object in a fantasy drawing the subject towards some Other Thing, a romance with image and screen pulsing in the void of its emptiness. There is no sexual relation, only the non-relation that comes of signifiers and fantasy. Similarly, there is no technological relation, but what appears as machines and ghosts. Like supernatural figures, femininity is an alibi: ' "What does a woman want?" In the discourse network of 1900 the alternatives are no longer motherhood or hysteria, but the machine or destruction' argues Friedrich Kittler.[38] It is no doubt more so in 2000. Vampiric femininity adds a spectrality to the masquerade and discloses the ghostliness of technologies: 'media always already provide the appearance of specters'.[39] There is something machine-like in romance since the courtly figure of adoration exists 'emptied of all real substance' as terrifying mistress subjecting the lover to a series of exhausting tasks.[40] Her position possesses an 'inhuman character' which masks the rules of the signifier. The lady of the romance operates in the form of 'a kind of automaton, a machine which utters

meaningless demands at random'.[41] If the fantasy of a sexual relation functions to conceal its absence, then the romance which conjures up the operations of the signifier discloses the workings of a (symbolic) machine upon the subject:

> For we have learned to conceive of the signifier as sustaining itself only in a displacement comparable to that found in electric news strips or in the rotating memories of our machines-that-think-like men, this because of the alternating operation which is its principle, requiring it to leave its place, even though it returns to it by a circular path.[42]

The combination of figures of feminine sexuality with the ghostly images of the cinematic apparatus presents a romance determined more broadly by the veiled machine that is always flickering in our faces: 'You are now, infinitely more than you think, subjects of instruments that, from the microscope right down to the radio/television, are becoming elements of your existence'.[43] For Paul Virilio, Hollywood itself appears as 'the city of living cinema where stage-sets and reality, taw-plans and scripts, the living and the living dead, mix and merge deliriously'.[44] In the unanchored, hallucinatory space of the hyper-real, where image production is increasingly generated by machines of fluctuating economic and optometric exchanges, humanized sexual differences play little part: 'Machines do away with polar sexual difference and its symbols. An apparatus that can replace Man or the symbol of masculine production is also accessible to woman'.[45] Drawn into the screens through the lure of a fantasy taken to excess, humans become shadows of the ghosts that flit in and out of the projected light.

Technological doubles, the replicants in human form flickering on the screen, remain narcissistic images: 'films anatomize the imaginary picture of the body that endows humans (in contrast to animals) with a borrowed I and, for that reason, remains their great love'.[46] But the investment in the selves that shine on the screen is also borrowed in the sense of being paid for on credit, a speculation that depends on the dues of interest. The economics of this relation parallels capital's investment in machines. Discussing the way that labour is rendered increasingly mechanical in its operations so that a machine can eventually be substituted for living workers, Marx writes:

> Thus the specific mode of working here appears directly as becoming transferred from the worker to capital in the form of the machine, and his own labour capacity devalued thereby. What was the living worker's activity becomes the activity of a machine. Thus the appropriation of labour by capital confronts the worker in a coarsely sensuous form; capital absorbs labour into itself – 'as though its body were by love possessed'.[47]

The citation from Goethe's *Faust* conjoins romanticism and capital as machines hover over the body of living labour. In film, too, money and machines come to dominate the modes of production and consumption through the specular lure of a romantic fascination with Thing and screen. Through romance and narcissism, credit is

demanded of spectres, a credit that renders human viewers ghostly doubles of the figures on the screen, visual consumers akin to the living dead that feed frenetically upon its surfaces. There is prospection as much as reflection in horror's vampiric images and techniques: 'film doppelgängers film filming itself. They demonstrate what happens to those who get caught in the line of fire of technological media'.[48] Viewers, indeed, are in the line of fire since the vision machines of cinematic romance are linked to the weapons of war. For Virilio, there is as much violence as there is romance: 'the terrorist aesthetic of optical impact that now emerges increasingly insistently on our monitor screens as on the screens of popular television' has the same aim as warfare – 'transforming the observer or viewer into an agent or potential victim'.[49] The supersession of sex by horror is crucial in the shift from 'eye lust' to eye fear:

> In fact the solitary pleasure derived by the spectator of porno films through the cinematic motor announces already the foreshortening which is beginning and which is comparable to that of the science fiction story in relation to the Biblical hypothesis: that is the disappearance of human intermediaries and the emergence of a sexuality directly connected to the technical object, provided that the latter is a motor, a vector of movement; the horror film then succeeds the erotic film as a more perfect fulfillment of the law of movement in a universe where technological progress corresponds to the utilization and search for extreme speeds.[50]

Speeds of transformation, speeds of decomposition, speeds of explosion and violence – sped up or slowed down – are a crucial part of horror's armoury. But the overstimulation of sense, from feelings of repulsion and recoil to thrill and excitement, depend on a combination of passivity before the screen and excess bodily sensation in front of it: natural emotions are wound up to an intense pitch, '*artificial* effects of the paroxysmal acceleration of representational techniques'.[51] Speeding up the senses in excess of rational comprehension, the aesthetics of the cinema become subordinated to the proficiency of technical demonstrations. In the process, viewers are simply subjected to the spectacular displays of technological systems, no more than effects themselves of the suprareal movements of images. The images of horror in which the spectator is consumed mark, for Virilio, a fundamental loss: 'between habituation to unbelievably violent films and overuse of telescoping in televised sequences, we are already seeing a rhythmic dispossession of sight, due in particular to the growing ascendancy of image and sound'.[52] Human capacities of vision and thought come to be given over to machines: in the overexposure of images and the permanent visibility of a luminocentric world, a different kind of blindness emerges, one in which visual prosthetics transforms humans into 'visually challenged' beings, 'a paradoxical blindness due to overexposure of the visible and to the development of *sightless* vision machines, hooked-up to the 'indirect light' of opto-electronics'.[53] Horror becomes all-too literal as technology realizes the uncanny association of blinding and castration: in the fullness of visual fantasy the gaze that looks back at the spectator is resolutely inhuman, beyond the screen and outside its horror.

[1] Quentin Tarantino, *Jackie Brown* (London: Faber, 1998), p.118.
[2] Jean-Joseph Goux, 'General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism' in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds) *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.196–213, p.201. See also George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).
[3] See Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, p.296.
[4] Goux, 'General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism', p.208.
[5] Goux, 'General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism', pp.203–4.
[6] Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.342.
[7] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin (trans.) (New York: Telos Press, 1981), p.89.
[8] Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p.92.
[9] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Alan Sheridan (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1977), p.31.
[10] Jacques Lacan, *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1970).
[11] Jacques Lacan, *Television*, Joan Copjec (ed.), Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Mitchelson (trans.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p.32.
[12] Jacques Lacan, *Encore. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Bruce Fink (trans.) (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), p.3.
[13] Lacan, *Encore*, p.3.
[14] Lacan, *Encore*, p.35.
[15] Lacan, *Encore*, p.4.
[16] The fate of the 'paternal' signifier is another question that there is no space to address here. Certainly, it is no longer 'the name-of-the-father' in any simple sense. In the context of a lack of any secure system of symbolic regulation, we could propose that the 'brand name' or 'brand loyalty' functions as one principle of co-ordination or limitation to the generalized imperative to consume, or the 'Desire of the Mother'.
[17] Lacan, *Encore*, p.3.
[18] Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Jennifer Curtiss Gage (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.194.
[19] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp.209–10.
[20] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (trans.) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.76.
[21] Rhonda Lieberman 'Shopping Disorders' in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Brian Massumi (ed.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.245.
[22] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1950–60*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Dennis Porter (trans.) (London: Routledge, 1992), p.121.
[23] Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty' in *Masochism*, Jean McNeil (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1989).
[24] Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p.15.
[25] For a more extensive look at the Tarantinian symptomatology in its ethical dimension see Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *The Tarantinian Ethics* (London: Sage, 2001).
[26] Tarantino, *Natural Born Killers*, p.43.
[27] Tarantino, *Natural Born Killers*, p.32.
[28] Tarantino, *Natural Born Killers*, p.33.
[29] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p.216.
[30] Tarantino, *Natural Born Killers*, p.45.
[31] Gerald Peary (ed.), *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988), p.180.
[32] Peary (ed.), *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, p.180.
[33] Quentin Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (London: Faber, 1996), p.70.
[34] Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, p.61.
[35] Clive Barker, Foreword to Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, p. vii.
[36] Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, p.86.
[37] Clive Barker, Foreword to Tarantino, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, p. vii.
[38] Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks* 1800/1900, Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.355.
[39] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.12.
[40] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p.149.
[41] Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p.90.
[42] Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972), pp.38–72, p.59.
[43] Lacan, *Encore*, p.82.
[44] Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p.26.
[45] Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, pp.351–2.
[46] Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p.151.
[47] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.704.
[48] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p.151.
[49] Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, Julie Rose (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.73.
[50] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Philip Beitchman (trans.) (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p.78.
[51] Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, p.73.
[52] Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, Julie Rose (trans.) (London: Verso, 1997), p.91.
[53] Virilio, *Open Sky*, p.91.

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Flesh Trade

Alphonso Lingis

Exchanges

It may indeed seem that exchange of goods and services is as old as humanity, and the original form of association among the first humans. The other primates form bands bound together by a basic intraspecies attraction, affection, and sexual interest, as well as for defense. But human societies are formed inasmuch as humans are interdependent on one another in the daily practice of exchange of goods and services. Societies are exchange systems, and the first recognition of promises, obligations, and debts in the market is the basis for all subsequent development of societies governed by internal laws.

Yet Friedrich Nietzsche and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss have both argued that the original and fundamental market at the basis of society is not the exchange of commodities, but the exchange of people. Anthropologists find the incest taboo wherever they find societies. Freud sought its origin in the emotions of individuals; so severe a prohibition could have been set up only to counter a correspondingly intense desire. This desire is the human infant's primary affective and erotic attachment to his or her parents, and the parents' very special attachment to an infant that was once part of their bodies. Claude Lévi-Strauss instead focused attention on the positive effect of the incest taboo. He declares that the incest taboo is the universal law of society – the law that produces a society. The incest taboo is to be sure a prohibition; it decrees that an individual must not marry within his own family, his extended family. Positively, it decrees that the parents must find a spouse for their son or daughter outside the household. It divides every clan into two moieties and sets up an exchange of sons and daughters between the two moieties. A son or a daughter is an economic asset to a family; they contribute work and resources to that family; the son hunts, the daughter gardens and weaves. The head of the household who goes to another household to obtain a spouse for his son will have to compensate that household for its loss. He may well not have a daughter to give in exchange. The father will bring a bride price. The two families will agree to assist one another with house-raising and defense against their enemies. Theirs will be a permanent economic and political alliance, a first society. The regulated exchange between households, clans, moieties, of daughters and sons as spouses is the basis for a regulated exchange of goods and services between the households.

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Prior to this founding pact, whereby daughters and sons are exchanged between households and moieties, we should not look for something more basic and more fundamental, which would be the exchange of goods and services. In fact among hunting-foraging peoples, everyone hunts and forages for himself and for his or her children. As among the other primates, bonds of affection between one or several would motivate some sharing of food and shelter. An occasional windfall, when a hunter or forager comes upon far more than he or she needs or can use, would result in sharing. But these occasional, casual cases of sharing do not give rise to rules, promises, and obligations. They exhibit herd bonds, not social relations.

Friedrich Nietzsche makes us understand that what the man who goes to the market wants is pleasure. He wants not simply yams or a sheepskin in their material nature, but the pleasure of a tasty meal of roasted yams, the pleasure of warm sheepskin bedding. A human body is also a source of pleasure. It is indeed the primary pleasure-producing substance. Stroking one's own body arouses shimmerings and spasms of pleasure. Someone else's body is also a possible source of pleasure – indeed the pleasure of another's body is greater than that of anything else he or she could give us. From infancy we experienced the pleasure of contact with our mother's breast and arms, experienced the pleasure of wrestling with playmates. Freud declared that the orgasmic interpenetration of human bodies is the greatest and most intense pleasure a human can know. The first market structure begins when one offers one's body as a pleasure-object for something in exchange – another's body, or pleasures taken to be equivalent. Thus a hunter in Africa or in the Arctic who brings a huge load of game to a household, which is not in a position to offer him equivalent goods in return, may ask to spend the night with the daughter of the house. And across the world today, men who have material riches exchange them with procurers for the voluptuous pleasure of nights with women or with men.

Lévi-Strauss envisions daughters and sons essentially as economic assets, producers and reproducers. He does not envision the particular take a suitor may have on a prospective marriage partner's body as a source of pleasure. To be sure, a man wants a woman to plant a garden and cook his meals so that he can hunt wild boar. But it is because her body is a prime generator of voluptuous pleasure that men compete with one another, offering her parents greater and greater piles of material goods for her now and later, and this suitor needs a big garden and time to hunt wild boar.

A market begins where the exchange of goods and services is governed by rules, where the exchange is not necessarily immediate but delayed across time, when there are promises, contracts, and obligations – and when these are enforced. It is on how they are enforced that Nietzsche fixed his attention. It is with physical punishment that unsatisfied market obligations are paid. What is behind this strange practice that allows someone, who has not received the goods he has contracted for, to punish the debtor, to inflict pain on him? How is it, Nietzsche asks, that someone who contracted for yams or for a sheepskin is satisfied if his debtor suffers pain?

We want pleasure – but each of us can turn suffering into pleasure. Our bodies know how to turn their pain into pleasure – know how to turn the tensions and aching muscles of a climb into vibrant sensuality. Our bodies would not sustain our

foul moods unless they turned them into a morose satisfaction. From infancy our bodies knew how to turn being chased and being thrown gasping for breath to the ground into heightened exhilaration. Freud noted that any activity that involves a shattering of built-up physical and psychic structures produces orgasmic excitement – he cites intellectual strain, verbal disputes, wrestling with playmates, and railway travel.

And each of our bodies knows how to experience the suffering, the pain, of another body as pleasure. How we grin with satisfaction before the intimidated, anxious eyes of another! How we laugh when we see someone whose stern look and words blocked our way now skidding and collapsing on the polished floor!

This man took the pig I brought back from the hunt and contracted to bring a sheepskin or a full sack of yams next market day. He could not or would not deliver, and he had fed his family with my pig. Copulating with him would give me no pleasure, and he has no daughter. So I beat him with my spear until he is bloody and groveling at my feet. And this pleasure – the pleasure of beating him, the pleasure of seeing him bloody and groveling – I find equivalent to the pleasure of the sheepskin or yams owed me. A punk adolescent broke into our apartment. The cops caught him, but he had already sold our hi-fi set and collection of CDs to buy drugs which he has already used up. How our bored bodies in the comfort of our living rooms bristle with pleasure when on the evening news we see him brought handcuffed into the court and, it being his third strike, sentenced to prison for life!

A market is not simply a place where pigs and yams or a sheepskin trade places of themselves. It is a place where humans contract with one another for pleasures. The pledges are made with their bodies. The calculations of equivalences, the rules, the obligations that govern the exchange of material goods are based on the more fundamental marketing of human bodies as pleasure-objects.

Lévi-Strauss takes the regulated exchange of spouses between households and moieties to be the first and fundamental form of market society. He does not see that the particular take a suitor may have on a prospective marriage partner's body as a source of pleasure can determine essentially different forms of daughter and son exchange, and thus essentially different fundamental forms of society.

Anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum distinguishes in the Melanesian area, three basic forms of marriage transaction, corresponding to three different takes on the human body. In the first form what is being contracted for, and given in exchange, is body fluids. In the second form, body parts. In the third form, it is the productive forces of the body, its ability to produce wealth. This may evolve to a fourth form, where it is external wealth itself that is exchanged as a token and pledge of those productive forces.

Note that these are structurally different types of transaction for bodies, and involve different takes on the human body as a pleasure-producing substance. The first is not the most primitive, neither chronologically nor structurally, and the last is not

the most advanced. We can easily find all four kinds of transactions in our Western societies today.

1. Body Fluids

The people anthropologist Gilbert Herdt pseudonymously, to protect them, named Sambia were found to practice the first kind of transaction – transaction with body fluids.[1]

The Sambia of Papua-New Guinea live, without rulers, in autonomous compounds. Sambia society is a dual economy; the men hunt and forage, and also maintain their secret orchards; the women garden. Men eat male food, the male milk of the pandanus trees they themselves cultivate and tend, and game from the hunt. They cook and eat together, in the men's house. Relations among men are fiercely egalitarian. Their combats, without battle-chiefs or strategies, are not wars, for territory, booty, or women, but feasts of ferocious individualism. Women garden, and eat what they raise. A married woman lives in her own house with her children. Her husband may visit her for sex, but he returns to the men's house to sleep. A wife, taken from another compound, remains bound to her own family, and in time of conflict she may lend her force to their's. The transaction does not deliver over the whole woman to the ownership of the husband. The parents do not properly speaking educate their sons; they will be initiated by the whole clan into the skills and tasks of each stage of their development. Mothers keep their daughters with them and educate them into the ways of women.

The primary social act is that of the young man who goes to another compound to transact for a woman. For the sister he takes from them, he pledges to one of her brothers his niece for that brother's son. And he will now give her younger brothers, those from seven to sixteen years old, of his male essence; he will give them his penis to suck in order that they, weaned from the female milk of their mother, will have the male milk they need to become men.

For among the Sambia the essence of life is fluid, it is in blood, female milk, and male milk. Human bodies are not producers of fluid but conduits of fluids. The milk-sap of the pandanus trees, the milk of female nature, is suckled by men; in their bodies it transubstantiates into the male milk of their penises. Men give the milk of their penis to boys that they grow into men. When these boys are filled with the milk of men to the point that the milk flows in their penises, they will give it orally to young girls, until the milk fills them and their breasts swell. Then when the excess blood of the women begins to flow from their vaginas, the husbands will pump into it their male milk. They will fill them continually day after day as the child coagulates in this mix of female blood and male milk. The infant is their coproduction. Mature male and female bodies among the Sambia are parallel, both conduits of fluids, giving their milk to infants that they grow into women and men. Men are men when they give male milk to women and to boys; when it ceases to flow they loose their maleness and become neuter or sexually indeterminate. Male and female identity is in the flow, and is itself a fluid identity.

Among the Sambia body fluids do not flow freely, they are coded, metered out. The fundamental act of association which organizes society is a transaction with portions of the self, fluid portions of a fluid self.

Manhattan. We both have careers. We have networks of friends; the city is a compound of theaters, galleries, cafés, discos. His job takes him to Chicago, LA, Berlin, Tokyo; business account dinners, hotels, singles bars. My job requires me to dress chic, to have dinner with advertising executives and out-of-town talent scouts. We own a private Key Club: our apartment on the Upper West Side. It was done by a decorator. I don't cook, neither of us does housework; we go out or call in to eat, have a maid. We have no children. We fuck with a condom. I have a vibrator and a dildo, and rights to his ass. He gives head, I give head. He nibbles on my tits, I bite his. We French-kiss in the elevator, in the taxi, at lunch break when we meet in the Japanese restaurant halfway between his office and mine. All the juice between us! His nervous circuitry is connected to the neon map of my Big Apple, my dreams navigate about the contours of his private movies, my steps move with the rhythms of the songs he has in his heart, his wit and nonsense ricochets off mine. Our talk is an idiolect of clandestine allusions, private jokes, whimsical taxonomies, perverse explanations. We team up for picaresque escapades in the halls and desks of office buildings, for island-hopping adventures on Caribbean cruise ships. Between us all the sophisticated and perverse and debauched emotions get rolled back and forth – an ocean in an illuminated plastic box with a small motor tilting it back and forth.

2. Body Parts

Many societies of the Eastern Highlands of Irian Jaya[2] illustrate the second kind of societies, characterized by transaction for body parts.

The high valley in Eastern Highlands of Irian Jaya is wet from the rains that collect about the mountains above and the melting ice. The people have dug deep trenches and created raised flats for gardens. It is very laborious, but the only season here is springtime and the crops do not fail. The women do not gather foodstuffs from the forest; they are skilled in the arts of gardening. They have learned to maintain the fertility of the soil by throwing the weeds into the trenches, and scooping up the rotted masses to spread back on the flats for the new planting. They raise yams, rich in nutrients, as the staple, and many kinds of vegetables to garnish them. All the labor, save for the actual digging of trenches and turning over the flats after a harvest, is done by women. The agricultural prosperity of the women separates them economically from the men, whose domain is the forests above rich in game. The men depart into the forests and return with feasts of game. Men are hunters, and head-hunters.

A young man of the Eastern Highlands walks with the arms of the most noble and fierce lords of the jungle in the perforated lobes of his ears, his nostrils, his arms, his penis: tusks of wild boars, the beaks of cassowaries with whom he has contended, the claws and plumes of eagles, and shells he has braved long treks down the slippery

paths of the dangerous jungle to obtain from alien people who plunge into the shark-patrolled ocean for them. He is a warrior. The combats in which he participates are Aztec flower-wars, or rather bird-of-paradise wars, exultant ceremonial feasts, where each is his own chief, elaborates his own strategy, and celebrates his own triumph. In the clash with the people on the other side of the ravine, he pursued and killed the one with boar's tusks through his nostrils and an array of glittering black bird-of-paradise plumes on his head, the most brave of their warriors. He cut off the head of the one he vanquished, stripped it of its flesh and brain, and has hung it over his door. He has eaten of the cadaver, whose pride and ferocity now smolder in him.

Now he is going to the other settlement – with which one season and against which another season the men of his fight – for a wife. He is bringing her father and brothers the tusks, fangs, shells, and plumes he will amputate from his body. These he shall graft to their nostrils, ears, arms, head, enhancing their male power as hunters, incorporating in them the weapons and power of the most lordly animals of the mountains and seas. They will take him as his son and their brother and give him the father's daughter, their sister.

Guido was born in Sicily, dropped out of high school, spent time in prison first for stealing a motorcycle, then for stealing a BMW and driving it in a 100-kilometer race through the mountains chased by the police. The race was watched on the television news by Pablo Padrone, the local Mafia capo. Pablo himself visited Guido in prison, and a month later Guido was free. Pablo arranged to have him train as a Formula One racer. In Le Mans he placed second only to the fabled Brazilian Ayrton Senna.

In Milan, Giovanni Bossi is the owner of a small company founded by his grandfather manufacturing luxury automobiles. The company has done well through thick and thin, its cars known to an elite of old money and junior executives of multinational corporations. The public has never seen Giovanni; his face is not known in the marble-sheathed lounges where the destiny of Italy is shaped. Giovanni has been several times pressured to merge with great automobile manufacturing companies, offered prospects of vastly increased markets. But for Giovanni the family pride, his pride, is attached to producing something as refined and aristocratic as a Samurai sword, something the whole world will be in awe of. He contacts Guido; will he drive one of Giovanni's cars in the Rio Grand Prix? He sees Guido's furtive glances at his daughter Julia, and sees also Julia casting fascinated glances at Guido. He already knows he will walk down the sumptuous cathedral of Milan before everyone who counts in Parliament and in Italy to escort his daughter Julia in marriage to his new vice-president. He will arrive with Julia at the cathedral in the racing car Guido drove in Rio, his hair disheveled by the wind like the mane of a lion.

3. Productive Bodies

Many societies in the Western cordillera of Papua-New Guinea illustrate the third kind of transaction – for bodies productive of wealth.

In the Western Highlands, women are skilled in the extensive cultivation of crops, and in addition have domesticated large herds of pigs. The women are rich. What the men can bring back by hunting in the forests is neither bountiful nor reliable. But the men have monopolized the sacred rituals and the ideological superstructure of society. Since acquiring a woman is acquiring a producer of external wealth, men are motivated to acquire more than one spouse. With status in the ritual and political sphere, men can traffic with other men for the acquisition of many women.

This young man has undergone the seventh-stage initiation, and has been accepted into the clan, knows the secret myths and rituals of the men. For him to acquire a wife is to acquire a producer of wealth, but he must also acquire status in the ritual and political sphere. He is a man; now he shall become a 'big man'. It is the daughter of an important man he sets out to acquire for a wife. By entering into the household of a man of status and wealth and guardian of sacred rituals, he will be able to acquire more wives, and more wealth.

He will perfect his prowess in the hunt, his father will call upon men indebted to him, until he can put before the important man and his sons a pile of rare shells, ritual objects or insignia of status, and large quantities of game. They will demonstrate his male power to acquire wealth in the hunt and through his political connections. The shells, ritual objects, and insignia will not be grafted to the bodies of the prospective father-and brothers-in law; they will be added to their family treasure. The game will be consumed in potlatch feasts in which the father-in-law extends his connections with other men and their obligations to him. What the suitor brings is his body which is that of a 'big man', what he offers is wealth that makes the father-in-law yet more of a 'big man'.

In this century such Melanesian societies have entered into relationship with Western societies. Food production in the village is supplied by the women; with game scarce and headhunting suppressed, the young men are drawn off to the plantations and the mines of the white men. They work for wages while the white men control the productive resources and the equipment. They really cannot use their wages to acquire productive wealth, plantations or mines, and the profitable plantation crops cannot be grown in their Highlands homeland. What they use their wages for is metal-buckled belts, wrist watches, gaudy and macho clothing, eventually motorcycles, which they will take back to their villages to offer as bride-price in exchange for women, the local wealth-producers. The fathers-in-law add these things to the hoard of shells, ritual objects, and insignia that constitute status within male society. Filling his compound with the sumptuary objects of white male prestige, the big man extends his prestige to white male society also. For the greatest male power a father can have is to be the headman of the village with which the white labor-recruiter will have to deal with.

The white men have a society in the region. Their connections, the various kinds of debts owing to them that other big white men may have acquired, enable them to become big men. They contract with other white big men for productive property, for plantations, mines, shipping vessels. They enter into transactions with the native big men for black laborers for their plantations and their mines. The raw materials

these laborers extract and the commodities they harvest, the white men market for a profit, which they invest in equipment for more profit. As resources they supply one's needs; as property that produces more property they materialize one's independence, freedom of initiative, status.

Here what figures in transactions is not one's body fluids, one's enhanced body parts, but one's 'big man' body – the treasure one has and the connections one has with other big men that give one's body social power. In the case of the Melanesian big men their wealth is unproductive; it is consumed in feasts that expand one's connections with other households and big men and their obligations to oneself. In the case of the white big men, their wealth is productive of more material wealth – which they also use to extend their connections and make junior partners, rivals bought out, and bankers obligated to them.

Big men marry among their own kind. When a suitor goes to his prospective father-in-law, he goes with his big man body; he is the eldest son of a plantation. He has connections: he is an officer of the Raj whose father is a General; he is the Oxford-educated son of a prominent London lawyer. Their marriages are alliances or mergers between plantations, mines, and shipping companies.

Lounge bar in Sâo Paulo. Skyview restaurant in Berlin. Fashionable club in New York. Where we professional, affluent, broad-minded, health-conscious, cultivated, sensitive white males meet educated, financially independent, street-wise, liberated, caring women. We are not, like savages, or like fiancés, just showing off body parts. One has to present oneself, represent oneself, the in way. It is by going to certain clubs, stepping out of limousines or off Harley-Davidsons, by the suave or swaggering choreography of our gestures, by an intricate rhetoric of allusion and multiple things never alluded to, that one's body attracts attention. Our bodies with their tinted contact lenses and hair implants, diamond chokers or razor blades, designer gowns or leather jackets, represent us. The invisible raiment our choreographed movements weaves about our bodies and the sophisticated lighting our sparkling allusions project upon our bodies enhance our bodies with our training, education, business acumen, and connections. We are amused by the TVs, the starlets, and the nerds who also deck themselves out with these things, the instant-executive, instant-fashion-model or instant-punk from Kansas or Belgium, come from an afternoon's shopping in the Upper East Side or in Soho. It helps to really have a degree from Princeton, an executive job at Macintosh, to be an editor of *Ms* or a dancer in Chippendale's. Vassar graduate on a date with a French yachtsman. Hollywood surgeon on a date with British novelist. Our lean, tanned, designer-clad bodies are the embodiments of a trend, a caste, the action, an empire. You get established in a career, you build up a business, you build a home that represents success. With these you have credit, can get loans and can transact for more productive wealth. What Aristotle Onassis produced with all his wealth generating wealth is Aristotle Onassis. A name with which he gets a Kennedy, not the hottest woman there is but the woman that represents all that Camelot America is.

Potlatch

Is it really true that exchange of goods and services is as old as humanity, and the original form of association among the first humans? Is it really true that societies

are exchange systems, and the first recognition of promises, obligations, and debts in the market is the basis for all subsequent development of societies governed by internal laws? Is it really true that, as Nietzsche wrote, 'setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging – these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking *as such*: here it was that the oldest kind of astuteness developed; here likewise, may we suppose, did human pride, the feeling of superiority in relation to other animals, have its first beginnings'?[3]

You are a hunter, you are a forager, you have also produced some things – made a canoe out of sealskins, a blanket out of fox fur. You have had luck in the hunt, the season was a good one this year and there was an abundance of things to forage. You had luck to be born in this region of abundance, in this community. You had luck to be born vigorous and without birth defects, to have escaped crippling diseases, luck to have keen eyes, the vibrant energy that is attracted by the distances, to have been gifted with skill and flair. Luck in foraging and in the hunt confirms one's sense of the good fortune of one's birth, one's vigor, one's keen eyes and flair. Luck comes to the lucky.

The sense of good luck is joyous. The proof of being lucky that comes in the lucky find or lucky hunt makes one's happiness a joy of existing. Joy is a release out of oneself, an onrush of vibrant energy that breaks out of one's preoccupation with oneself and bounds forth to the distances. The happiness of good luck is realized, is real, is released in laughter. Laughter exists and extends outside.

The excitement of hunting does not come from the assurance of knowing you will be successful; it was the excitement of the gamble in which you risked coming back with nothing or even being killed. Gardening is drudgery; foraging is exciting, for there are poisonous vipers out there in the thickets where berries grow. Women laugh at night over a leopard that stalked them, a horny guy that chased them over the rapids of the river.

You were lucky in the hunt, killed a wild boar; you were lucky in foraging, came back with a whole load of mangoes. You will part with them. The man who killed a wild boar will feel the recklessness and freedom of parting with it – even if he would get in exchange a pile of grain which he will consume in a couple of months, and which already is an admission, though having been lucky today, of not being a lucky guy. The woman who parts with the splendid blanket she made of bark fiber dyed with multicolored berries ostentatiously demonstrates she has no need of it. Parting with one's wild boar, one's splendid blanket fills one with the reckless exultation of wagering that one is on a lucky streak, that one is someone blessed by fortune.

One gives them away to those who need them – food and a blanket for one's children and aged grandparents. But one gives them away to those who do not need them: one spreads out one's finest blanket and covers it with food and, laughing, calls everyone to days and nights of feasting.

The buyer is always humble. One is humiliated in having to admit one had no luck in the hunt and has to go buy a coat from the lucky one with the fox skin, in having to buy an ordinary basket just to carry one's foodstuffs.

The one who has a polar bear skin to part with, or a woven blanket, is lucky, and knows his existence blessed by fortune by his inward feeling of happiness. His or her proof of his or her continued good fortune is in parting with the polar bear skin, the woven blanket, wagering that he or she is on a lucky streak. This ostentatious parting at a loss is glory. Those who are humiliated and defied by this unabashed parting with goods, honor and bow to good fortune in their very humiliation, and strive to prove themselves equal to that good fortune.

In a community where everybody knows everybody, the one who parts with his fox coat or fine blanket defies the others. He or she will find his or her equal in the one who has a polar bear skin to part with, the one who has a yet finer blanket woven of brightly colored bark fabric to throw into the feast. Reckless joy spreads by contagion, like laughter.

It is this impulse to part with goods one has acquired by luck that is at the origin of the market. The market is originally the place where one shows off one's luck, affirms that one is lucky by undergoing loss. Like a gambler who stakes all his winnings on the turn of the wheel, one proves one's luck by staking it. One brings in a winter's collection of beaver hides, sells them to abject buyers, to merchants everybody disdains, spends everything on food and drinks for one's peers and nights of voluptuousness, and sets forth gaily for the forest again.

To be sure, the market is also a place where the humble barter for basic necessities. But the market is not the arena created and ruled by what Nietzsche calls thinking as such – ratio, reckoning, setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences. The merchants themselves do not become rich by exchanging for the equivalent; they become rich by their skilled eye and flair and by the luck of being there when the big spender arrives. And the luck of having being born in Myanmar where their fathers knew where the rare rubies are found, having the connections to obtain Chinese silks and the luck of having eluded Shan bandits in the mountain passes. No one is more superstitious than merchants.

Every society that functions in its environment, that is not in a state of famine or siege, produces luxury products. In societies with apparently the most rudimentary economies, one finds jewelry that took amazing skill to make, intricately woven feather headdresses, ceremonial masks – objects made to be worn not for everyday use but in feasts and then thrown away or given to someone else. Champagne is not made to be drunk alone; one pours champagne like water to one's guests or fills the bathtub with it for a woman one has picked up for a one-night-stand in a city one is visiting for a convention.

Does one have to say – economists do try to say – that the one who brings his leopard skin or the splendid blanket she made of bark fiber dyed with multicolored berries to the market is exchanging material goods for prestige? But that is a forced

attempt to maintain the model of exchange of what others need for what one needs. Prestige is not something one needs like one needs food, clothing, and tools. It is the recognition by others of one's good fortune, one's happiness. And happiness is exhilaration, that is, recklessness and freedom.

But one's good fortune, one's happiness, is not constituted by the recognition of others. The fortunate one parting with a polar bear skin or a woven blanket sees in the recognition by others of his good fortune a secondary confirmation of his happiness. Let us emphasize that it is a secondary side effect. The one who comes back from foraging or from the hunt with a bagful of fruit or a deer and calls upon everyone around to feast with him is not motivated by some kind of Hegelian process whereby he can only recognize himself and his good fortune by having it recognized by others. To the contrary; his sense of being lucky, of being happy is immediate, and happiness breaks out in laughter, and laughter exists in contagion. Everybody rushes to the side of the lucky one, in the hunt, in foraging, in battle, in gambling, for luck is contagious. We laugh; his laughter is not an initiative or an attitude he takes up marking his distinction from us; his separate identity and that of the others appears as epiphenomenal and ephemeral as that of waves that rise in the agitation of the sea.

What about that fundamental market at the basis of society, which Lévi-Strauss and Nietzsche have argued is not the exchange of commodities, but the exchange of people? Lévi-Strauss defined marriage as a contract whose rules have been drawn up by men for the distribution of women, those economic assets. But Georges Bataille has instead emphasized the festive essence of marriage.

For the father, his daughter is not simply an economic asset he has produced; she is a luxury object. He does not barter her for goods and services; he gives her away. He gives her away in a great potlatch feast where he also squanders great quantities of his wealth on rare foods and champagne. Luck and prodigality spread by contagion: the wedding guests, carried away in the festivity, will be inspired to do likewise, a great wedding launches the whole community in a potlatch competition of great weddings. The mother says I have not lost a daughter; I have gained a son. She does not mean that in exchange for her daughter's help in the kitchen she is getting a son to mow her lawn and fix the car. She means that she is a woman rich, rich in resources but especially rich in love, and she is overjoyed to have a son whose new home she can finance, on which to lavish her time to baby-sit when they want to go out to the concert or on vacation, and on whom to leave her savings when she dies. The bridegroom gives his bride to all the men to kiss. He will bring her home and think that nothing is too good for her; she deserves the finest clothes, and rarest jewels. He will prove this periodically, by sinking weeks, months, of his labor to buy her glamorous gifts on her birthday, on the anniversary of their marriage. He will take her to balls clad in glamorous gowns with plunging neckline to give her to everyone as a feast for their eyes.

This deep-seated conviction, that love and having at one's side such a body productive of pleasures are not earned and paid for, but gifts of luck, is even more evident among the very poor. The Brazilian day-laborer who has nothing but who has a

lover inexhaustibly prodigal in kisses and caresses deems himself the luckiest man in the world. On the anniversary of their engagement, this woman in a slum in Mexico City does not deprive her husband of the plain food he needs to sustain his strength in his grueling factory job; instead she fills their shanty with wild flowers of which the earth is prodigal and which she finds in the railroad embankment. How many millions of gays and lesbians lead today's culture to repudiate every thought of that political and economic contract which is marriage, every thought of contract in their sexuality in which they see nothing but chance, in their loves in which they see nothing but luck!

We can then see that the forms of transactions at the basis of the forms of society which Lindenbaum distinguishes are doubled up and undermined by festive, celebratory forms, just as in the hub cities of advanced capitalism the Casino is next to the Stock Market, and indeed the Casino is in the Stock Market. We can see these festive, celebratory forms in our societies today, and it is probable that they always existed in the markets of all kinds of societies.

1. Potlatch of Body Fluids

'Give Blood' – it stands out as the sincerest, most uncynical cry in a media and billboard world where marketing experts tease, deceive, badger and befool us all day and all night. 'Give blood' – the meaning and rightness of those words are understood on every continent, in every culture. It is only individuals and peoples really down and out that sell blood. The most precious liquid is beyond all price. Blood is life – fluid life; to sense the coursing of our blood is to sense our fluid bodies, our fluid identities. Blood is to be given, given freely, given freely to the unlucky, victims of car crashes, of leukemia, of failed operations in hospitals, as blood, life is given, freely, by luck, to us. Giving blood, to one's lover, to one's child, to one's parent, to one's wounded buddy on the battlefront is the strongest affirmation of the pure luck of having that lover, child, parent, buddy.

Men identify their being lucky with being sexually potent. It is true that nowadays there are semen banks where the down and out can sell their semen. For those who are not so unlucky, there is the sense that semen has no price. It is only in the very worst of households, spouses of aristocrats who so crave children so as to have something on their own, spouses denied of voluptuous nights with their husbands, who speak of marriage rights – the right originally set up in ecclesiastical law of a woman to the semen of her husband, of the right of a husband to use his wife to reproduce his lineage. But for most, semen is that male milk, to be given unstintingly, like champagne poured out prodigally, like the seed the meadows scatter to the winds. Now the microscope has revealed to us that a single male ejaculation contains spermatozoa enough to repopulate the entire planet were all the rest of humanity rendered sterile, as a single tree scatters seed enough to repopulate the entire forest.

And what is more universally understood on the seven continents than a woman giving of her breast-milk to the infant of the woman who has none? This image appears in the work of every photographer who visits a refugee camp and sets out

to show that these people are not the criminals and scum their pursuers have proclaimed them to be.

2. Potlatch of Body Parts

All those tusks, fangs, shells, and plumes that the young hunter in the Eastern Highlands of Irian Jaya grafts into his nostrils, ears, arms, head, so magnifying his body function as amulets in which the weapons and power of the most lordly animals of the mountains and seas are at his service in the hunt and in combat. He offers them in exchange to her father for his daughter. Grafted onto his, or his father-in-law's body, they are prostheses, supplementary body parts. But as talismans they serve to proclaim him lucky. As such they are also made to be given away. No more than a king sells his crown to his debtors does a warrior in Irian Jaya sell his shimmering headdress of bird-of-paradise plumes to a tourist or to a Javanese merchant marketing steel axes and mosquito netting. As his father-in-law roasts all the pigs he owns to celebrate the giving away of his daughter, this young man throws into the potlatch feast all the tusks of wild boars, the beaks of cassowaries with whom he has contended, the claws and plumes of eagles, and shells he has braved long treks down the slippery paths of the dangerous jungle to obtain from alien people who plunge into the shark-patrolled ocean for them.

And today too there is the deep feeling that all objects that can be grafted onto the body to enhance its splendor are luxury products and gifts by nature. The most successful businesswoman buys costume jewelry for herself, but the real jewels, the ruby earrings and the diamond ring must be gifts. Even her stay in a Beverly Hills clinic for a face-lift has to be the gift of her lover. Men can purchase Swatches, but the gold Rolex must be a gift. A young man may finance his own crotch-rocket motorcycle, but his spaceman helmet should be a gift from his lover. The supreme virile glamour of a bodybuilder is a luxury product. He must not use this superlative musculature to demand extra pay for extra work, but his honor holds him to be always there whenever a woman, a stranger, or a weakling is being picked on.

3. Potlatch of Productive Body Parts

Karl Marx eloquently analyzed the resources industrial capitalist society finds in human bodies. For industry people are hair that gums up, that loses its luster, its bounce, that gets gray, that falls out; people are teeth that get yellow, brown with smoking or tobacco-chewing, that accumulate plaque and acids and foul odors; people are feet whose arches fall, which develop odors, whose toes develop fungus between them; people are stomachs that get acidic, that develop cramps, that bloat after Thanksgiving and Christmas meals, that develop gas that awakens the body at night. To pay for shampoo and jeans, foot powder and workshoes, toothpaste and beer, hamburgers and antacids, the workers sell their manpower, their skilled hands or just the brute force of their arms and back, their 20-20 vision, their brainpower, or their imagination. Industry purchases men as hands without decision-capacity, as labor-force without understanding, as calculative faculties without imagination, as

ambition without heart, as ordering faculties without whim or caprice. Men in the army are arms, armed forces; the soldier is detached from his understanding and decision. The advertising agent's imagination is detached from his own desires; the capitalist himself from his fancy and his tastes. The capitalist who trades the family home for industrial property and invests the family reputation in a commercial logo, invests all his brainpower in the factory, he capitalizes on his virility to acquire the kind of wife that will be a corporate asset; he sells himself as surely as do the laborers.

Marx denounced this dominant take on human bodies as sets of productive body-parts and consuming body-parts with the conception of alienation. Capitalist society not only alienates a worker from the instruments and resources of his labor and from the fruits of his labor, but further alienates him from his own body-parts, forcing him to sell his arms, his back, his brain, his imagination to another. The notion of alienation invokes the notion of the integral man who would belong to himself, possess his own arms and legs, have a brain of his own and have his own imagination and fancy and will.

But does not this conception of alienation derive from the dominance of the notion of possession, which notion precisely capitalism makes sovereign? Bourgeois society, by drowning the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, chivalrous enthusiasm, and Philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation, by pitilessly tearing asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and leaving remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, has made the notion of possession, appropriation, acquisition coextensive with the person. To exist as a person is to maintain all one's parts and their properties under one's own control.

What in fact doubles up and undermines the society that transacts with productive and consuming body parts is a different kind practice, with those very body parts. The hand is not only a boney hook for taking and shaping, it is the organ for giving, and giving energizes its movements. 'Let me give you a hand' – says one worker to a novice or weaker worker who is being the paid the same for his manpower. 'Come give us a hand!' shout the team trying to shift an I-beam or deal with the crates spilled out of a truck, to workers employed on other tasks in the yard. If we say that it is in the contractual relationship signed by the hand of the employer with men for the strength and skill of their hands that industrial capitalist society is formed, how can we not see that it is in those countless acts of giving a hand, in factories, on docks, in garages, on highways and in back alleys that humanity is acknowledged and formed?

Médicins sans frontières, Greenpeace, physicians spending their vacations performing cleft palette surgery on peasant children in Guatemala and in Thailand so that they will grow up being able to smile, nurses working in refugee camps on five continents, amateur naturalists spending their vacations doing bird censuses on Caribbean islands, people rushing out to help when whales are beached – people giving a hand.

Minds are devoted, in medical laboratories, in the rain forest, in isolated stations in Antarctica to unlock the secrets of plague-bearing viruses, of intricate ecosystems

within ecosystems, of the ozone shield, of the formation of the solar system five billion years ago, of the final apocalypse of the universe a trillion trillion light-years from now. Minds disconnected from the noise and fury of the market, connected onto thin columns of ants, the thin strands of synapses in the bodies of bats, electron microscopes, carbon-dating equipment, gene-analysis equipment, telescopes in outer space. Brain-power in the right places in industry is to be sure highly paid. But so many of these researchers are researching things that will never have market value. And what do they do after hours, week-ends? Their brains continue to research. What do they do after they retire? They research. Potlatch of brain-power.

The soldiers arrived in Haiti to give the Haitians a hand at overthrowing dictator Raoul Cedras. There were greeted by throngs with shouts of welcome and upraised hands, as liberators. I walked the streets of Port-au-Prince, seeing these battle-hardened combat troops playing with and giving snacks to ragged street kids. I took some photos, but I thought that there are always photos of soldiers playing with orphaned beggar street kids in the wake of every battle. So that night in the veranda of the old hotel with free-lance reporters, stringers from a half-dozen countries, I said, 'Soldiers are soldiers, tell me some bad stories, about them'. 'There aren't any', they replied. A Belgian journalist told me he saw them, black soldiers but white also, against strict orders, sharing their rations with Haitians. A Dutch woman journalist had photos of a soldier carrying on his back to the hospital a man wounded by the toutons macouts. A Chilean woman had seen that in Cap-Haitian. An Australian stringer had seen that in Souvenance.

Death is potlatch. It is the ultimate letting it all go, giving it all away, for nothing. Throughout history, death and life overlapped, such that living was dying. Mothers often died in childbearing, giving birth to a life not their own and dying. Mothers expected to die about the time their children gave birth to children. In Bali, parents who live on after their children have had children are treated as survenants, ghosts lingering where they are out of place. People experienced their labor, when the life in them was most powerful and most intense, as a dying: to labor is to expend one's forces. One should not, because one cannot, conserve one's forces. You worked all a lifetime and in the end gave it all away, took nothing with you, not even your corpse, for you went nowhere. That you die by a stroke of bad luck shows that you were lucky to have lived. Happiness consists in knowing that one lives by luck, and in the reckless freedom of staking one's life. A wedding feast, an extravagant gift, an exhausting effort made to rescue someone lost at sea or in an avalanche, a life spent in research that brought no profit and perhaps ended in a dead end – all these forms of potlatch got their meaning from death, were festive and celebratory ways of dying.

But now death, that ultimate potlatch, is pushed further and further from view. As every decade passes, people are living a year longer. Soon they will living another forty years after retirement. Immortality is dawning in laboratories: scientists have already discovered the biochemical which programs how many times a cell will replicate before it is exhausted. They have already succeeded in altering that biochemical, and have produced fruit fly cells, which normally replicate 90 times, that now replicate three hundred times. They have produced old mice that are as strong and energetic as young mice, they have produced patches of human skin

whose individual cells now replicate four and five times the normal. Foreseeable within a century will be a planet whose people live three hundred years. Critical for a humanity that lives on exchange will be the daunting task of keeping people consuming so that they will be treated as having a right to exist in humanity. Will potlatch survive in a humanity become immortal? Will feasts, celebrations, luxury gifts, will giving blood, giving milk, giving a hand survive?

Notes

[1] Gilbert H. Herdt, 'Fetish and Fantasy in Sambia Initiation' in *Rituals of Manhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp.17–27, pp.52–53; and Gilbert H. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), passim.

[2] Shirley Lindenbaum, 'Variations on a Sociosexual Theme In Melanesia' in Gilbert H. Herdt (ed.), *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia* (California: University of California Press, 1993), pp.337–61.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p.70.

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Material Excess and Aesthetic Transmutation[1]

Katya Mandoki

1 Introduction

'Nothing in Excess', reads the maxim on the walls of Apollo's temple at Delphi. Dionysus, on the contrary, is related to every kind of excess: mystic in the religious, orgiastic in the sexual, ecstatic in its ritual dances, euphoric and inebriated in the Bacchanals. Dionysus was hence patron of wine and of highly impassioned arts like song, drama and poetry (all expelled from Plato's *Republic* precisely for this reason). His symbolic presence summons a sense of freedom, fertility, generosity and ease. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claimed that the combination of Dionysian and Apollonian forces beget art and enable harmony in life.[2]

The connection between excess and the aesthetic is deep-rooted and can be viewed from two standpoints: the aesthetics of excess through artistic, natural and quotidian objects, and the aesthetic itself as excess, which will be the main focus of this paper. My interest here is to explore not only this aesthetics of excess but its counterpart, the excess of the aesthetic, by examining the social processes whereby the aesthetic becomes a fundamental manifestation of material excess through a variety of concretizations among radically dissimilar cultures.

There are various ways of coping with such material excess: accumulation, destruction, dissipation and distribution.[3] The most reasonable, ethical manner of dealing with excedents in a context of social inequality is obviously distribution. Anthropologists, however, have hardly found significant samples of distribution societies in Western or non-Western cultures, whereas cases of the other three forms of dealing with excess are prevalent.[4] The primary questions with which this paper is concerned are: why is the phenomenon of the dissipation of excess, rather than its distribution, so generalized even among quite distinct cultures? Why does the aesthetic dimension often appear so closely related to these processes of dissipation? For the purpose of elucidating such participation, we will explore the relation between the aesthetic and excess through a dual itinerary: tracing excess in what is considered aesthetic through both instances, artistic and quotidian, in Western cultures and tracing the aesthetic in rituals and customs related to the expenditure of excess in non-Western cultures. By comparing both perspectives, we will find that the definition of excess and of what is socially acceptable in relation to property and accumulation of excedents varies significantly from one culture to another, yet the role of the aesthetic in regards to

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material excess seems to be universal. This role, I will contend, is related to a process of symbolic transmutation that underlies the dissipation of excess.

2 Terminological considerations

2.1 On material excess

Three authors have explicitly dealt with the idea of material excess: Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille. They all mention the aesthetic but none of them, unfortunately, deals with it in particular. It was Bataille, in *The Accursed Share*, who worked more extensively on the idea of excess to the degree of proposing a Copernican revolution of economy based on it. Counter to the dominant paradigms in economics, Bataille maintained that both nature and society obey a pattern of excess rather than scantiness and limited resources. He stated that a living organism receives much more energy than it needs, and that this excess of energy is not only inevitable but has to be dispersed else it becomes destructive, turning against the organism.[5] The excess of sperm for a single ovum (120 to 600 million), the excess of ova deposited by many species, the excess of female *jouissance* that Lacan had difficulty understanding,[6] all illustrate this tendency to dissipation and exuberance. For Bataille, this century's World Wars were the catastrophical consequence of industrial excess that was not voluntarily spent when required. I will not attempt a thorough analysis of this very controversial thesis proposed by Bataille, also incomplete in its argumentation and theoretical development. I will only examine his heretic view on the economy of excess in relation to the aesthetic within the perspective of Mauss' study of preliterate societies which, as we shall see, in fact, influenced Bataille's own conceptions.

2.2 On necessity

Two senses of the term 'necessity' must be outlined: the logical sense as opposed to contingency, and the functional sense as opposed to superfluity. Although both senses meet at the end, this distinction is worth maintaining at the outset. Adam Smith defined the latter in the social sense as: '[b]y necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without'.[7] Bataille goes from the logical to the functional sense when he illustrates the economy of excess as the non-contingent process whereby the sun necessarily produces a surplus of energy far beyond the functional needs of the planetary system. Superfluity is a relative value according, for instance, to an anthropocentric view that measures its usefulness for a specific purpose. We will attempt to describe how the aesthetic mediates this shift from logical to functional necessity by being both non-contingent, as attested by its occurrence in all cultures, and functional, as a social practice intimately involved with the dissipation of excedents.

2.3 On the aesthetic

Mainstream aestheticians have primarily centered their analyses around specific objects (artworks) and qualified them as worthy of aesthetic appreciation according

to particular standards, thus relatively disregarding the aesthetic as a contextualized, multifarious social practice. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have introduced us to more contextualized societal customs in other cultures but, on this particular issue, they have borrowed from traditional aestheticians the concept of the aesthetic referred to specific objects (quilts, ceramics, masks) rather than to events (customs, rituals or ways of life). Instead of reducing the aesthetic to aspects or properties of certain objects, a more comprehensive conception is needed to discern its social meaning and connection to material and symbolic production. The concept of the aesthetic applied here attempts to be more encompassing and consider events, interactions, experiences or objects that are sensitively arousing, appreciated for their sensuous qualities and open to judgments based on taste.

3 The beauty of exuberance; aesthetics of excess in Western cultures

Exuberance is beauty
William Blake[8]

The idea of excess precisely as aesthetic goes against the sense of economy of means highly valued by traditional art critics and aestheticians as it indulges in superfluity, immoderation, profusion and redundancy.[9] What is undeniable, however, is that there is an aesthetic of excess.[10] No one can remain aesthetically indifferent towards various manifestations of excess, whether natural or manufactured: lush vegetation, the abundance of stalactites and stalagmites at Mammoth and Postojna caves, the colossal scale of the Hypostyle Hall of the Karnak temple, the overwhelming power of water at Niagara Falls, the monumental extension of the Great Wall of China, the glare and opulence of the Mirror Hall at the Palace of Versailles or the excessive ornamentation of the Hall of Justice at the Palace of the Nasrids in the Alhambra.[11]

That excess is aesthetic does not mean that the contrary – frugality, decorum or simplicity – cannot be aesthetic. Historically, art appears to be a pendulum that oscillates between excess and restraint. On whatever side it happens to be, this pendulum is always moving in reference to excess, whether towards or against it. What is impressive in Pharaonic, Gothic, Islamic, Mannerist, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic and Expressionist art is partly due to an excess in scale, in aggregation, in vigor, in depth or in fervor. Art has developed dialectically from the disembodied images of Medieval painting to the exuberantly embodied characters depicted during the Renaissance, particularly by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo and later by the sensualism of Rubens. The Renaissance perfect proportions of the human body and sense of balance were further exaggerated in the Mannerist expression of Parmigianino, Fiorentino, Goujon, El Greco and Goltzius. Formal severity and the contained emotions of Jean Louis David's paintings sharply contrast to the Romanticist ardor of Delacroix and Guericault.

Formal excesses that flourished in Art Nouveau were completely eliminated by Bauhaus and Functionalism through an almost puritanical restraint which, in turn, has been reversed to the intentional anachronisms, chromatics, ornamentation and humorous allusions of Postmodernism. Minimalism, Geometrism, Concretism,

Suprematism and Neoplasticism display formal control towards minimal, compact patterns (Malevich's *White Square on White Background* could hardly go further in formal and chromatic austerity). Yet, on the other side of the pendulum, we simultaneously have the excess of colour and emotions of Expressionism, the intense cromatism of Fauvism, the oneiric hyperboles of Surrealism and the lucid irrationalism of Dada.

In contemporary art, illustrations of excess are equally eloquent. We have the exaggerated scale in Christo's earthworks, Pop art's overstatements on mass culture (Lichtenstein's enlargements, Oldenburg's huge inflatable artifacts, Warhol's alliterations and excessive colour, Jeff Koons' gigantic photos), as well as the enthrallment with excess in the viscerality of Punk, Body and Performance art.[12]

Regardless of the categories involved (beauty, ugliness, magnificence or the grotesque) excess is linked to the aesthetic in that it captures attention, engages our sensibility and seizes our imagination not only through art but in everyday life. Excessively long fingernails, extremely narrow waists, voluminous breasts and amazingly high heels are exhibited as aesthetic attributes of femininity. An excess of food, as when a whole turkey is laid on Americans' Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner table, is appreciated as an aesthetic expression of bountifulness. Excess of speed at roller coasters and car races, of sound and volume at discotheques, of sun, sand and sea at the beach are enjoyed by many as aesthetically pleasing. Thousands of crashed cars, of buildings on fire and endless explosions repeatedly represented in the movies and on television are relished by the public as a spectacular exhibition and destruction of excess. The excess of space in vast lobbies and halls, the excessive physical effort displayed by athletes, the exaggerated apparels presented in fashion shows, drag queen contests and carnivals are all appraised in terms of their aesthetic effects. Certain objects such as porcelain figures, plush animals, souvenirs and posters are not only displayed for an ornamental purpose but to exhibit some degree of material excess even among economically deprived urban classes, as are artworks among more affluent classes. Gifts are typical symbols of excess: jewels are gleaming, perfumes are pleasant, liquor is luscious, bouquets are lovely, chocolates delicious and bonsai cute; none are necessary, all are excessive and each is aesthetic.[13] We may react with pleasure or displeasure to the excessive, but we can never remain indifferent to it. Excess is never aesthetically neutral.

4 The excess of the aesthetic and its phylogenetic roots

We examined above the aesthetics of excess through art, nature and everyday life in Western societies. We will now consider the other side of this relation, the aesthetic itself as an excess. Bataille explores how excedents are consumed in various kinds of societies such as the Aztec sacrificial theocracy, Moslem militarist and Lamaist monastic organizations. His work on this subject was inspired, as he acknowledges, by Mauss' investigation on the Tlingit and Häida communities, particularly their *potlatch* ceremony, which is a competitive dissipation of excedents for generating prestige and stabilizing the community. Based upon Malinowski's discoveries on the inhabitants of the Trobriand islands and the ritual of the *kula* that regulated the circulation of gifts, Mauss found a variety of gift exchange customs among groups

in different parts of the world that were of equal compulsory reciprocity.[14] He states that the *potlatch*, sometimes accompanying special occasions such as a wedding, a circumcision, birth, sickness, or a daughter's arrival at puberty, involves not only giving away precious objects but the dilapidation of goods by throwing copper artifacts to the sea, burning lard, demolishing canoes and setting fire to the chief's house or to an entire village.

The aim of these ceremonies is to overwhelm and impress the rival group for the sake of achieving honor and, in the Maori case, generating the force of *mana*, the magical, religious or spiritual force in Maori religion. This ceremony was named by the Chinook term *potlatch* meaning 'to feed' or 'to consume'.[15] As Mauss insisted, these exchange ceremonies are never voluntary, but compulsory in nature: there is an obligation to reciprocate with gifts of equal or greater value.

The conscious aim intended by a *potlatch* is expressing gratitude to human or divine beings, inspiring respect and establishing a position within the community. In fact, there is no reason why these ceremonies must be aesthetic at all. A discrete distribution of goods could suffice. What is interesting to note from our perspective, however, is the prevalent aesthetic quality of these rituals. Accompanied by song, dance, food, speeches and performances, *potlatches* appeal to the senses and require a careful attention to form and protocol that captivate the members' imagination, sensuous delight and admiration. They are not mere squandering or destruction of goods, as in the case of dumping, because they are always publicly exhibited, and thus become communicative or symbolic acts that must comply to a particular form emphasizing the message for its own sake, precisely what characterizes the poetic or aesthetic function of language according to Roman Jakobson.[16] As the form displayed through artworks is a necessary condition to deem them artistic, the form or manner in which goods are presented, shared and dissipated in the *potlatch* is what conveys meaning and effectiveness to the act and deems it aesthetic.

Let us imagine two contending tribes, each trying to surpass the other, each offering greater quantities of goods, of better quality or more exceptional, brought from remoter places or made with greater talent and skill. The *potlatch*, then, is an aesthetic event in its appeal to the senses, in sensitively affecting the participants, in its being source for appreciation and sensuous pleasure and open to shared judgments of taste based on *sensus communis*.

Mauss and Malinowski believed they found the origins of economy and of law, of religion and morality in the *kula* and *potlatch* patterns of circulation. I suggest that we might also seek therein the roots of the aesthetic. In preliterate societies, if one must give away most of what one possesses for the sake of balancing and preserving the community, this must at least be done with style and character, displayed before everyone, in a memorable event and dramatically surrounded by ritual. This public display marks the difference between mere destruction or unpretentious distribution and aesthetic dissipation. As cave art of the Paleolithic period integrated magic, communication, technology, economy and the aesthetic, these ceremonies, although ephemeral, similarly combine various purposes: economic, legal, religious, aesthetic, social and political. The *potlatch*, moreover, accomplishes various communicative

functions defined by Jakobson: expressive of status, conative in compulsory reciprocity, referential of material proficiency, phatic in maintaining balance and contact within the community and aesthetic in complying to a particular form of realization that generates sensitive appreciation. Circulation and expenditure of excedents, therefore, imply confidence in material exuberance and its foremost manner of display is, and has been, aesthetic.

5 The limits of excess and the law of cyclical dynamics

Mauss began an inquiry on economy and ended with an inquiry on morality. He was concerned with understanding the code behind this obligatory reciprocity: 'What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?' Remarkably, Mauss implies in the second question a partial answer to the first: It is the belief that there is a power within objects that acts upon people and forces them to reciprocate gifts. This power is the *hau* or spirit of objects, which retain part of the soul of their maker and can be destructive if not properly recognized and dealt with. The Maori people call *hau* this spirit that clings to an object when ownership changes: one must relate to this concrete presence in objects when one introduces them into one's home.[17]

Mauss found among the communities of the American Northwest what he termed 'total social phenomena' meaning:

> [A]ll kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather of performing total services and of distribution. This is not to take into account the aesthetic phenomena to which these facts lead, and the contours of the phenomena that these institutions manifest.[18]

Up to here we have most of what Mauss can tell us concerning the aesthetic: hardly an allusion. Other economists and anthropologists relevant to our point (Veblen, Sahlins and Bataille) prove no more enlightening. What does Mauss mean by saying that these facts lead to aesthetic phenomena? I will venture an answer.

These 'total services of an agonistic type' are performed for the sake of producing *mana* or honor and prestige for the host. It is not clear, however, why or how destroying things of value – that have a soul or *hau* – can generate prestige or *mana*. If there is a power in things that compels reciprocity through gift exchange among archaic societies, why wouldn't this same power impel their preservation rather than their destruction? For instance, the power of time, of human labor, of information that forces us to preserve artistic and historical documents seems to be contradicted by the practice of the *potlatch*. There must be another reason, in addition to *hau* or 'soul of their maker' that can explain the process of reciprocity and help us to understand how the destruction of useful objects produces prestige.

According to Mauss, certain ceremonies have to be performed because 'to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself ... To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal.[19] The reason for compulsory reciprocity lies, therefore, less in the *hau* or spirit of the thing retained, than in the act of retaining it. At issue here is the attitude towards retaining or giving and differentiates Western retentive societies from expulsive communities like the Häida and Tlingit. This difference, I contend, is a question of pulse understood as centripetal or centrifugal disposition in regards to things and the environment.[20]

There are, on the one hand, societies that display centrifugal *pulse* and pride themselves in their power of giving away, like those communities that practice *potlatch* or *mayordomía*. These customs commit the host or *mayordomo* to pay for the dancers, musicians, candles, incense, pyrotechnic exhibition and feast, keep the Saint surrounded by flowers a whole year and celebrate the Saint's day by feeding the whole community, even giving each guest an *itacate* of food to take home that will satisfy his or her family for several more days.[21] Western capitalist cultures, on the other hand, exhibit a centripetal tendency and value their power to accumulate to the degree that prestige and honor are a result of hoarding wealth rather than sharing it. Monumental houses are built, sometimes a series of them, to keep a collection of lavish items to be displayed in front of guests for obtaining admiration. Certain commodities, such as art, yachts and cars, have the special convenience of making money more patently visible and ostensible. Bank accounts are personal and private, but the ostentation of excess by means of art and car collections is presumed to remain within the realm of good taste due to an aesthetic alibi. In cases in which excess is ostentatiously squandered, as in the opulence of wedding and birthday celebrations or in political campaigns, it is a well-calculated investment, a declaration of status or power and an opportunity to directly exhibit pecuniary property or political ascendancy. For these Western centripetal cultures, sumptuary consumption, as Veblen has explained, is indicative not of how much the hosts are capable of giving away but of how much they still own so that they can afford to spend those amounts.

Since hoarding can be unlimited for Western capitalistic cultures, excess is literally impossible, for there is always room for more. We may accumulate almost everything without restraint: artworks, real estate, information, money and property. There is one instance, however, where excess and accumulation are strictly forbidden by contemporary Western standards: body fat. Excess of weight is taken as the utter antithesis of the aesthetic. Fashion is designed to expose and emphasize the ideal body weight and shape. Movie stars and sex idols exhibit their perfect control over extra fat, sometimes even explicitly specified in their professional contracts. While there exists a real terror of putting on excessive weight, a notion of excess in pecuniary property, which can likewise attain degrees of monstrous obesity, is utterly lacking.

This bizarre logic of prestige and aesthetics does not operate in more traditional, so-called archaic communities. Whatever anyone's weight happens to be is of no concern to others except as a symbol of well being, whereas accumulation of goods is as despised in *potlatch* communities as accumulation of fat in the Jet Set society. I find this interdiction of hoarding wealth much more reasonable than the taboo of hoarding weight, since the former is eminently social in character.

From this point of view, what differentiates Western ideas and values from so-called primitive communities is not as much the latter's fetishism or animistic superstitions regarding the *hau,* but the borders between the essential and the excessive and the contrasting sense of *pulse* and of value from which the individual attains prestige. The non-Western version of Smith's definition could then be phrased as follows: the excessive is whatever the community considers indecent to hoard.

In sum, the logic underlying obligatory reciprocity would appear to depend less upon the *hau* of things observed by Mauss, than upon a dynamic and communal sense of life, of the world, of work and of its products. As I mentioned above, it is a matter of *pulse* or an attitude towards retention rather than toward what is retained. Compulsory reciprocity comes from a worldview that considers as mere common sense that we must give back what we receive, obvious in natural biological processes as breathing and eating, birth and death, sowing and reaping. The circulation of matter and energy, the moon and the sun, the changing of seasons and tides, all evince a pattern of giving and taking and of abundance and dynamism, not of penury and immobility.

The order that Mauss called 'total social phenomena' goes beyond the social, encompassing the cosmic as well. That is also why, as Mauss realized, destruction of wealth is only apparent because it is understood as returning to the spirits and the gods part of their due.[22] To give away almost everything one possesses in a ceremony of *potlatch* or *mayordomía* is only possible if one understands economy as Bataille described it, as an economy of excess. From this perspective, there is an underlying faith that whatever is lost will be recuperated in one way or another, a faith in the generosity of life. This holistic awareness explains the practice of reciprocity among communities like the Tlingit and Häida studied by Mauss, seemingly not as much because of the belief that things have a spirit that can take revenge, but because everything must be kept in motion. To retain or to hoard is, in this context, a *contra-natura* attitude, equivalent to imprisoning or holding hostage something destined to be in motion.

6 Aesthetic excess; a shift from material to symbolic functionality

> It is difficult to believe that prehistoric man wouldn't have a certain awareness that, in introducing certain excedent formal elements he was exceeding the practical utilitarian limits beyond which a new space would be opened: precisely what we call the aesthetic.
>
> Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez[23]

Kant's understanding of aesthetic appreciation as 'pure disinterested delight' implies that it does not produce any kind of material benefits, does not generate concepts, and is an end in itself: pure gratuitousness.[24] This sense of gratuitousness seems to be Bataille's indirect debt to Kant when he argues that Aztec human sacrifice pretended to set humans beyond the utilitarian, liberating sacrificial victims from servility. Although Bataille was mistaken in attributing to the Aztecs the belief that

sacrifice was gratuitous or non-utilitarian, he nonetheless was accurate concerning the human need to transcend the utilitarian.[25] Had Aztec human sacrifice indeed been, as Bataille argued, non-utilitarian, it would have been even more monstrous, hardly discernible from killing for the sake of killing. The prevalent view among Aztecologists holds, however, that sacrifice was almost a technological device for preserving the world according to Aztec myths and beliefs.[26] In their worldview, it was simply logical that the sun god, like humans, had to be fed. Human sacrifice for the Aztecs was both logically and socially necessary, not excessive. How Aztecs transcended the utilitarian and expressed excess was not in sacrificing victims to the sun-god but in the aesthetization of this 'technology for survival' through the spectacularity of their rituals and festivities which constituted their theocratic aesthetics. In other words, the excess was not in the sacrifice itself, which was technological, but in its aesthetization. Such technology was strictly based on Mauss' concept of compulsory reciprocation in both directions: Huitzilopochtli must reciprocate human sacrifice by guaranteeing the community's survival as the community must reciprocate the Sun-god's daily battle against darkness by sacrificing some of its members.

The prominent Marxist aesthetician Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez has noted that the aesthetic occurs as an excess that goes beyond strict instrumentality and generates a function that opens up 'a new space' into the aesthetic. He implicitly diverts from Kant's conception by understanding the aesthetic not as non-utilitarian but as meta-utilitarian. In other words, we have here a function that is still practical, although not as a physical utensil but as a symbolic function. Decorated flint tools, for example, display gratuitousness by exceeding their strictly instrumental form, which in turn produces a shift from the original function involved. Functionality is not annulled as these tools are still useful in a different sense: 'The product of labor, by putting to work the capacity to transform matter, continues being an instrument, albeit a symbolic one, that enables it – thanks to its form – to act upon the real'.[27] How does this shift from instrumental to symbolic functionality occur? Sánchez Vázquez unknowingly agrees with Jakobson's concept of the aesthetic with regard to its functionality specifically defined by an emphasis over form itself when he states that 'a product fulfills this symbolic function when it acquires a ''good form'' (or ''excedent form'') as a result of ''good work'''.[28] He adds on the same page:

> All the creative power of painter-hunters of the Upper Paleolithic period, culminating what was accomplished during thousands and thousands of years of work – and among its highest achievements was the capacity to endow the material with an 'excedent' form – was symbolically, magically put to the service of the practical end of hunting wild animals.

While Kant conceives of the aesthetic as a wholly separate realm from the utilitarian,[29] Sánchez Vázquez defines the aesthetic as an extension beyond the utilitarian, as a kind of excess that does not cancel the functional but incorporates and transcends it through symbolic functionality. This shift from instrumental to symbolic functionality explains the aesthetization of excess and provides a clue to Bataille's assumption of excess' necessary dissipation.[30]

7 Dissipation, distribution and aesthetic transmutation of excess

The main question concerning excess at the start of this paper was: why is it dissipated rather than reasonably distributed? The answer seems to involve the antipode to excess or the realm of utmost precariousness: mortality. Material excess may seem limitless, but an individual's life is fatally limited. Consequently, whenever there is material excess, it is intended to be exchanged for vicarious temporal wealth. How can temporal wealth be attained? Only through a transition from the private to the public realm, that is, by the vicarious permanence in the memory of other members of the community. The aesthetization of material excess preserves the *hau* or spirit of things by the symbolic mediation of the aesthetic which carries it to the public sphere, recirculates it and converts material dissipation into symbolic accumulation of prestige or *mana* and in the memory of others.

As a process of sublimation, Western art is understood also as a permutation of personal libidinal energy, that is, corporeal, mental or emotional energy, into more durable social, cultural and symbolic wealth. Material wealth is private or personal, whereas symbolic wealth (as language, prestige or power) is always public and depends on appearing before others for recognition, interpretation and conservation.[31] We have several homological permutations that echo one another: the material to the symbolic, the private to the public sphere, the corporeal to the cosmic, the transitory to the abiding, the individual to the communal, all mediated by the aesthetic.

Thus aesthetic dissipation of excess is both expected to fulfill an operation of exchange from material to symbolic capital and from private to public wealth by accomplishing a relative distribution of excess, since the pleasure conveyed by it can be shared with the gods and by the community through *potlatch*, *mayordomía*, carnivals or other religious ceremonies. Aesthetic transmutation of material excess thus consolidates all four manners of dealing with excedents: destruction, dissipation, accumulation and distribution of excess.

There must be an underlying belief in various cultures that the gods are aesthetically sensitive and thus aesthetic objects can better capture their attention and good will for the community. When there is confidence on the generation of excedents, a significant part of the population is dedicated to aesthetic activities that are related to both power and religion. Material excess invested upon monumental architecture, i.e. pyramids and temples, does not mitigate the material needs of the population, yet it becomes a patrimony of the whole community. This way, excess becomes perceptible to all. The more magnificent monuments are, the more confidence the community may have in its capacity for survival and the more it may feel protected from attack by intimidating rival groups. A community may take pride in the excesses it is able to afford and spend even vicariously in the person of the leader, until excess is withheld and accumulated rather than symbolically shared, as in autocratic and despotic States, and ultimately destroyed by popular revolts.

It is not surprising that non-Western and Western cultures have a differing attitude towards material property that compels circulation in the former while in the latter impels accumulation. The difference stems from a contrasting view on personal identity and on the relation between the individual and the community, culture and

nature, in each society. What is remarkable is the point where such dissimilar cultures converge, that is, in the common belief and practice of the transmutation of material goods into symbolic wealth via the aesthetic. This process of transformation of material into symbolic excess mediated by the aesthetic is apparently universal.

While Aristotle advised temperance, what we really enjoy is excess: It assures us that life is magnanimous and the world exuberant. Consequently, in a context that is bountiful, it is only natural to be generous. It has, in this sense, ethical repercussions. Strict calculation and control over people's time, desires and energy, as occurs in totalitarian and bureaucratic regimes, stems from a sense of a precarious reality. It moreover leads, as Bataille insisted, to war and uncontrollable destruction. If excess is logically necessary in economy and nature, as Bataille argues, then, along the same lines, it must be acknowledged that the aesthetic, as its symbolic transformation and a relatively harmless and fully gratifying way of dissipating it, is functionally and socially necessary.[32]

We need to trust the possibility and actuality of the excessive itself, the feeling that excess is real, that we can lose without remorse, that there is a margin for vagary and play, that life gives more than we can take. This necessary confidence is nowhere better conveyed and expressed than by the concretization of the aesthetic. If excess is inevitable and its dissipation imperative, then the aesthetic is indispensable.

Notes

[1] A previous and more schematic version of this paper was presented at the XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics at Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 1998 (published in the proceedings).

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy*, with commentary W. Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Vintage, 1967 [1872]).

[3] The difference between destruction and dissipation is that the former, exemplified by dumping, is mere waste or demolition of goods, whereas the latter is publicly displayed.

[4] One exception to this rule is the kibbutz, whose main ideal is precisely an autonomous community of equal distribution.

[5] Georges Bataille, *La parte maldita* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1987), Francisco Muñóz de Escalona (trans.) from *L'usage des richesses* (Paris: Minuit, 1949), pp.57–8. All quotations from Spanish into English are my translations.

[6] For a critical examination of this aspect in Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies* (Illinois: Open Court, 1994), pp.311–17.

[7] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*. Book V, Ch. II, Part II, Article IV ('Taxes upon consumable Commodities') Edwin Canaan (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), II, p.399.

[8] Cited by Georges Bataille, *La parte maldita*.

[9] Hospers' key concept of 'unity in variety', for example, asserts that in the unified object there are all the necessary things and nothing superfluous. John Hospers, *Understanding the Arts* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp.102–14.

[10] An unusual attempt to explore excesses (sexual, libidinal, emotional) in relation to madness, perversion and psychoanalysis via the artistic by examining authors like Sade, Breton, Artaud, Bataille, Nietzsche, Klossowski is in Allen S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess* (New York: SUNY, 1989).

[11] The sublime in Pseudo Longinus as noble and elevated feelings and attitudes, in Burke as an idea of pain and terror in Tragedy and Kant's as an excess of reason over imagination (mathematical and dynamical sublime) are all related to human faculties, an altogether different matter from material excess dealt with here.

[12] See, for example, Orlan's eccentric facial transformations, Ulay and Abramovic pain-inflicted body art, the ritual performances of Stewart Brisley and Hermann Nitsch (1998). For the latter's Aug. 24 1998 performance at the Prinzendori Castle, he used of 1000 lt. of animal blood, 13000 lt. of wine, 1000 kg. of grapes, 1000 kg. tomatoes, 2000 flowers, 10,000 kg. linen

and so on. Its artistic value may be questioned but not its unequivocal excess.

[13] The Trobriand tribes studied by Malinowski exchanged necklaces and bracelets, objects that, not strictly necessary as food and tools are, can be considered luxurious and symbols of wealth. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1961 [1922]).

[14] Including the American Northwest and the Rocky Mountains, Polynesia, Malaysia, Papua, South America and New Zealand.

[15] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, W. D. Halls (trans.) (New York: Norton and Routledge, 1990), p.6.

[16] 'La visée (*Einstellung*) du message en tant que tel, l'accent mis sur le message pour son propre compte, este ce qui caractérise la fonction poétique du langage'. Roman Jakobson, *Essais de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p.218.

[17] Mauss, *The Gift*, p.11.

[18] Mauss, *The Gift*, p.3.

[19] Mauss, *The Gift*, p.12.

[20] See the specific sense of the term 'pulse' in Katya Mandoki, *Prosaica, introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano* (México: Grijalbo, 1994), pp.163–66.

[21] A common tradition of Prehispanic origin still practiced today in Mexico City at the *barrios* of Xochimilco and Ixtapalapa.

[22] Mauss, *The Gift*, p.16.

[23] Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Invitación a la Estética* (México: Grijalbo, 1992), p.100.

[24] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790] James Creed Meredith (trans.). Electronic version from the American Philosophical Association Gopher. Section 2 'The delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest'.

[25] See Bataille, Part II, Chapter I 'Sacrifices and wars among the Aztecs', *passim*, particularly when he states:

Sacrifice returns to the sacred world what servile use has degraded, profaned. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) what, deeply, is of the same nature as the subject, that keeps with the subject an intimate relation... Destruction is the best means to deny an utilitarian relation between man and animal or plant. Bataille, *La parte maldita*, p.92.

[26] Caso concludes saying that:

For the great cultures of Mesoamerica, the invention of technology was substituted, in many ways, by cult... For the Mesoamerican Indian, sacrifice is the technical means to bring rain, make corn mature, end sickness, bring the father, husband or son safely back from war or commerce, help the wife give birth to a strong and vigorous baby. Man by himself can do nothing; his technique is inefficient; only sacrifice to the gods can make them benevolent to solve human needs.

See Alfonso Caso, *El pueblo del Sol* (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1953), p.125.

Moreover, as Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (Edmundo O'Gorman ed., México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1967) states, the Aztecs sacrificed all sorts of living creatures to the gods, not only human but animals, not for the sake of elevating them over their servile, profane condition, as Bataille's view implies, but to bring benefits to the community, as private *ofrendas* were made in every household to bring benefits for the family.

Bataille himself quotes Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, contradicting his ideas of the non-servile belief of sacrifice. 'Truly, you are not in an error by wanting that the soldiers should die in combat, since you have not sent them to this world for a mission other than to serve as food to the sun and the earth with their blood and their flesh'. Bataille, *La parte maldita*, p.90.

[27] Sánchez Vázquez, *Invitación a la Estética*, pp.100–1.

[28] Jakobson, *Essais de Linguistique Générale*, p.218.

[29] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, SS15 'That the delight in an object on account of which we call it beautiful is incapable of resting on the representation of its utility, is abundantly evident from the two preceding articles; for in that case, it would not be an immediate delight in the object, which latter is the essential condition of the judgment upon beauty'.

[30] See note 4.

[31] I understand this appearance before others in the public realm according to Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Sec. II.

[32] Based on Darwinian approach, Ellen Dyssanake argues that the aesthetic, or rather the artistic, is non-superfluous because it is necessary for survival. See her *Homo Aestheticus; Where Art Comes From and Why* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1992). I, on the other hand, am claiming that the aesthetic, artistic or not, is necessary precisely because it is superfluous.

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Virtual Bataille

Michael A. Weinstein

The following writing is what Georges Bataille called a 'sketch' (*ébauché*), providing the categories and concepts of a movement of thought-practice that can be illustrated with particulars at the reader's whim. Here it is particularly compressed and abstract, meant to engender absorption and, by its austerity, the play of the reader's imagination. It follows Bataille's text, *Theory Of Religion* (itself a sketch); therefore, the statements in it about Bataille are about the author (subject-position) of that text and not Bataille in general.[1]

The Impetus To Intimacy (Excess)

From the moment that human beings, singly or as a species, set up in reflective consciousness an object separate from themselves, the interiority of which is then irretrievably closed to them (and they do this because they must), they are simultaneously driven to strive to return to their previous condition of intimacy with the world. For Bataille, human beings are essentially torn between their conditions of survival, which require them to remake the world and themselves in order to use it successfully (to persist in time), and their nostalgia for communion. 'Excess' plays such a central role in Bataille's text because it is the sign that the drive to return has broken through the constraints imposed by the endless process of using tools to produce and reproduce life, to vault from one moment to the next.

The state of pre-reflective intimacy is not Edenic and is, perhaps, delusive. The pre-reflective animal fails to recognize the independence of that which is other to itself – in Bataille's prime example, the animal nourishes itself or is consumed in momentary orgies of eating and being eaten. The return to pre-reflective intimacy is fraught with violence; human beings ordinarily do not relish eating live animals nor might they think that they would find it orgiastic to be eaten alive, yet something fundamental in them drives them toward that moment.

The root of human nature, for Bataille, is economic, posing an anguishing tension between production and consumption. Economics here should not be understood to mean only what is commonly understood as the differentiated economic system of modern (capitalist) societies (the market transactions of getting and spending), but human existence as a whole, which is constituted by the order of tools (technology)

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and the impetus to exceed that order through consumption, which puts a temporary halt to the endless pursuit of means. Bataille is misunderstood if he is thought to be an apostle of pre-reflective experience; rather, he believes that human beings are condemned to be *homo faber*, but he would like to provide a place in the technological order for returns to intimacy, an eventuality that he is doubtful can be achieved: for all of his visionary extremism (a form of literary excess), Bataille is a reformer.

Bataille is also misunderstood if he is thought to mean by 'excess' its common usage as a synonym for immoderation. 'Excess' is an ontological category for Bataille, not a term in moral discourse. It is a mistake to dwell on his violent examples and then praise or condemn him, forgetting the impetus to intimacy that they illustrate. The violence in Bataille's texts reflects the violence in pre-reflective experience and the violence that is required to break through the technological order, which is internal to consciousness, to reach pre-reflective experience. A Bataillean critique of contemporary economy is based on a reading of the fate of the will to intimacy in the technological order.

The Reign Of Things

Bataille's great contribution to critical economics was to integrate the critique of technology and the critique of productionism; indeed, Bataille brings the notion of a producer society to its idealized extremity.

The tool is, for Bataille, the mediator that distances human beings from intimacy, simultaneously putting into play the object to be reworked and the subject who (that) works on it. Once the tool has been interposed between the human animal and the world, intimacy recedes and becomes an episode in the order of the real, which opposes subjects and objects, and imposes an at first incipient and finally a hegemonic reign of calculative reason over consciousness and an infinite process of production over practice.

In his elegant sketch of an Hegelian-style phenomenology of lived ((self-)conscious) experience, *Theory Of Religion*, Bataille describes the complicated twists and turns through which productionism and the impetus to intimacy reached unstable compromises, most notably the sacrifice, in which objects of utility are lifted out of the realm of things and consumed for no immediate or mediate material end, and the festival, in which human beings find temporary release from the round of work. Human history, for Bataille, is the tale of the steady recession of intimacy from the horizon of consciousness. The first key moment of that history was the emergence of the military empire, which substituted instrumental rationality in the service of conquest for mythology (turning violence outward on the other), and instituted self-conscious law to pacify its interior. The second key moment was modern Protestantism, which, by unlinking salvation from works, rendered production free to pursue its own (non-)finality, the endless ramification of means.

Bataille's phenomenology culminates in Chapter IV, 'The Rise of Industry', in the sub-section, 'The World of Complete Reduction, or the Reign of Things', which

articulates his vision of an idealized productionist society. Addressing the modern condition, Bataille writes: 'The millennial quest for lost intimacy was abandoned by productive mankind, aware of the futility of the operative ways, but unable to continue searching for that which could not be sought merely by the means it had'.[2]

The (seeming) abandonment of the impetus to intimacy marks a radical rupture with all preceding history; rather than a tension between production and consumption (instrumentality and finality), production now appears to go its own way unopposed: human beings single mindedly attempt to construct a world in which productive forces grow without limit (the impetus to intimacy is overridden by technological hegemony) and 'more and more ... material needs' are met.

The results of the abandonment of the impetus to intimacy have been acute self-alienation (human beings are cut off from their pre-reflective consciousness) and the impossibility of 'an intense consumption (commensurate with the volume of production)'. Everyone is drawn into 'the industrial enterprise', indeed, willingly: '... no one disputes the principle of this sovereignty of servitude'.[3] Then Bataille writes (ironically?): 'It is clear that the majority of mankind *is right*; compared to the industrial rise, the rest is insignificant. Doubtless this majority has let itself be *reduced to the order of things*'.[4] In the next sub-section, 'The Clear Consciousness of Things, or, Science', Bataille concludes his meditation on 'the reign of things', tying it to the fate of the impetus to intimacy: 'Thus knowledge and activity [science and industry], developing concurrently without subordinating themselves to one another, finally establish a real, consummate world and humanity, for which the intimate order is represented only through prolonged stammerings'.[5]

Bataille does not leave matters at this moment of extreme (self-)alienation; he is a dialectician who finds in extremity the possibility of reversal. The 'perfect fulfillment of the thing', he writes, allows us to pose 'the problem of man's reduction to thinghood' by eliminating all the past compromises between the order of things and the order of intimacy: 'Only the gigantic development of the means of production is capable of fully revealing the meaning of production, which is the nonproductive consumption of wealth – the fulfillment of *self-consciousness* in free outbursts of the intimate order. But the moment when consciousness, reflecting back on itself, reveals itself to itself and sees production destined to be consumed is precisely when the world of production no longer knows what to do with its products'.[6]

Bataille proposes to achieve 'free outbursts of the intimate order' through a devolutionary dialectic that reverses the moments of thought-action that led to the reign of things, bringing human beings back to pre-reflective consciousness through the offices of hyper-reflexivity – a reflection, which, by striving to make of intimacy an object rather than deferring it to an afterlife or abandoning it, runs up against the impossibility of its task and exceeds reflection, breaking beyond it to its vital substrate.

Virtual Intimacy

Both Bataille's description of the contemporary economy and his prescription for intimacy are excessive. The pure reign of things without any dialectical opposition

to it (from within itself) might be achieved in a world where human beings are replaced by androids (a real possibility), but short of that the impetus to intimacy continues to function; under the sign of Bataillean excess, the reign of things operates to wrench self-consciousness away from the technological order by revealing the anguish of self-alienation that it provokes. The devolution of self-consciousness, leading to the paradoxical ascetic practice aimed at a moment of consumption is itself the excess of thought, reflection consuming itself, destroying the toilsome construction of the ideational component of the technological (productionist) order, the work of the ages ceaselessly pursued since the invention of the first tool.

Within the sphere of science, the reign of things is not excessive; it functions as an ideal type (Bataille was an admirer of Max Weber) against which the dominant technocorporate society can be measured. As a practice, the devolutionary dialectic is restricted to intellectuals; it is a personal discipline for a select minority of the theoretically self-aware, the practitioners of dialectics. If free outbursts of the intimate order are to be generalized, some other means or causes will be operative.

What is the fate of the impetus to intimacy in contemporary technocorporate society?

Bataille believed that the fact (thought) that production no longer knows what to do with its products (the existential problem of the meaning of excess production) might open the way to a purposeless consumption of them. In a sense that Bataille did not foresee and that takes his meditations in an entirely different direction from the one that he followed, that is coming to pass.

Technocorporate society solves the existential problem that is engendered by its surplus by virtualizing consumption, allowing the reign of things to continue unimpeded. The limit case is virtual intimacy.

The power of virtual reality was already well understood in Bataille's time. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* comes to mind as a parallel text. The negative utopia described by Huxley is nearly a pure example of the reign of things; it is a producer society regulated by bio-engineering whose inhabitants are strictly divided into a hierarchy of functional classes, mirroring the system in Plato's *Republic* and materializing it. Yet Huxley understood that as long as the components of this system were human beings, they would need moments of consumption; that is why he introduced the 'feelies', where people would receive programmed sexual stimulation and release that would not disrupt the order of production.

Taking Huxley a small step further, imagine an intimacy machine, a virtual-reality suit programmed to provoke in people the sense of free outbursts of the intimate order. One could hook oneself up to this machine and be wrenched into pre-reflective consciousness by extreme sensations and perceptions; indeed, one might even be able to experience eating or being eaten by a live animal. All of this would be a riskless adventure, except (emotionally) for the duration of the experience, and it would be paid for as a service, firmly within the order of production. Virtual intimacy would have none of the disruptive effects on the reign of things that would follow from public orgies of consumption; everything in the productive order would remain

intact, material growth and production for its own sake would continue unabated, and the provision of virtual intimacy would be yet another business: after a session with the intimacy machine, the individual would return to the order of production, which s/he had never left.

The intimacy machine is not far from the means that technocorporate society has already developed to prolong indefinitely the process of production for its own sake. The productive order does not have to face the problem of what to do with its products, as long as the finality of consuming them is virtualized; it can keep people perpetually under the sovereignty of servitude to production by finally walling up (self-)con-sciousness in simulation. Television, shopping malls, theme parks, gated communities, fantasy resorts, video games, *ad nauseum* are only tokens and harbingers of the synthesized 'intimacies' to come.

Notes

[1] Georges Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1989).
[2] Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, p.92.
[3] Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, p.93.
[4] Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, p.94.
[5] Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, p.96.
[6] Bataille, *Theory Of Religion*, p.96.

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Engulfed by the Surf

Michael Richardson

Your mind is perpetually lured away, unhinged, snared by the trap of darkness that egoism and pride have devised with crude skill.
Isidore Ducasse

Roger Caillois[1] tells of waking one morning to find he had become a conformist. Paradoxically, though, he finds that, far from being fêted by society, he is attacked. Where he had once been praised for his audacity and originality, he is now relentlessly criticised. Editors refuse his articles, not wanting to inflict his puerilities on the public. He receives insulting letters criticising him for his commonplace ideas and wanting to know what had become of the challenging and uncompromising writer he had once been. He concludes by defining the real conformist as someone who detests conformism and that to assert that one is a conformist is, in reality, to become a rebel. At a time when excess and revolt have become marketable commodities, Caillois's parable has more than a little topical relevance.

As Caillois implies, few people choose to be conformists, most have it forced upon them, and it is indeed increasingly the case that the difference between the rebel and the conformist is difficult to discern. Georges Bataille himself might have had a parallel experience to that which Caillois describes had he still been alive on the day in which the collection of his writings *Visions of Excess* was published in English in 1985.[2] This volume established Bataille's reputation in the English speaking world and its emblematic title defined the framework within which his work would be considered. As an often virulent critic of accumulation and restraint, Bataille's intense body of work perhaps fitted into the context of the Reaganite and Thatcherite eighties with perhaps greater comfort than might have been expected.

Writing at a time when scarcity and its alleviation dominated economic thinking, Bataille put forward what was then an audaciously unfashionable view that the main economic problem in modern societies was not scarcity but the inability joyfully to spend the richness that was all around us. In this respect, it might be said that Bataille was indeed a prophet of our current society, in which it is precisely excess – or more exactly consumption[3] – that is at the root of economic well-being. Whether Bataille had a 'vision' of such a society is doubtful to say the least, but it is undoubtedly the case that

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his work in many ways underwrites part of the contemporary mentality that extols conspicuous excess as a touchstone of contemporary reality. The conformist rebellion that dominates trends in contemporary art – the wretched assemblages of the likes of Tracey Emin or the Chapman Brothers (which bring attention to the fact that the work has no content but that of its own disembodied excessiveness and a charmless and aberrant – if artificial – sexuality) clearly owe a conscious debt to Bataille. This conformist indulgence can be seen in the way sexuality, drug-taking and the yearning for experience – any experience – becomes the measure of a will towards empty consumption and instant gratification. It is most apparent, perhaps, in the hunger for information that dominates the age. In particular, the expansion of computer technology and the cultural values it has engendered call for special attention.

In a recent interview, David Mamet said: 'I can envision no device more capable of spreading ignorance and illiteracy than the computer. It is, like the atom bomb, a naturally evolved engine of oblivion, a sign, like the Tower of Babel, that civilisation has run its course'.[4] It is too soon, perhaps, to be making quite such a sweeping generalisation, especially when the computer is being extolled as having the potential to open up knowledge much more widely than ever before. Thanks to the computer, we can, at least theoretically, have a much more extensive experience of the world and lead greatly enriched lives. Whether it is possible for such possibilities to be realised, however, is another matter and Mamet is right to be concerned. For it is already clear that the hubris which surrounds the computer disguises many of the fundamental problems it brings with it. The comparisons Mamet makes both with the atom bomb and with the legend of Babel are by no means idle musings, and need to be taken seriously. They alert us to the way in which we are building a construction that does indeed mimic the Tower of Babel and may well lead to a surplus of communication whose almost inevitable result, if blindly accepted, will be a breakdown of communication. The Internet, in particular, initiates endless possibilities for empty babbling and includes no restraining constituent able to provide a context that any medium of genuine communication needs in the long run.

In the future, information, it is said, will be the real currency. This is perhaps a banality. In fact, has it ever been otherwise? It is more significant to enquire what sort of information this will involve and how will it differ from information in the past? As a bald fact it is untrue that information matters more now. It is not information that has become more significant, but its role within societal relations. What matters is not information, nor even access to it, but access to the means of *processing* certain types of information. The Internet will be central to this, but not, I suspect, in ways we now envisage. For most people, the Internet will be a treasure trove of all the irrelevant knowledge of the world. As it grows it is likely to become increasingly difficult to use effectively and so will provide the means for a new élite to codify it for their own benefit. The idea that it is a tool for the empowerment of ordinary people is surely a chimera.

Fears about computers tend to be confined to fanciful ideas about artificial intelligence and their potential to take on human qualities. Advocates of computerisation sneer, pointing out, no doubt rightly, that such fears have always accompanied technical advances, and reflect no more than fear of the unknown. Yet, if such anxiety is unfounded, it masks a more profound danger.

No technology is neutral in its impact. It always reflects the society in which it is born. In this respect, Octavio Paz, reviewing McLuhan's *Understanding Media* at the time it was published in 1964, was already stinging as he emphasised the central issue which is even more immediate to us now and which we too often refuse to address: 'The systems of the past . . . were at once a criticism of reality and an image of another reality. They were a vision of the world. Technology is not an image of the world but a way of operating on reality. The nihilism of technology lies not only in the fact that it is the most perfect expression of the will to power. . . but also in the fact that it lacks meaning. *Why?* and *To what purpose?* are questions that technology does not ask itself. What is more, it is not technology, but we ourselves, who should be asking these questions'.[5] In noting the failure to ask these questions, Paz, rightly I think, identifies the way the new technology is considered, and which differentiates it from all earlier forms.

The problem, of course, is not computers, but our attitude towards them. Or more precisely, it is the way in which our attitude to computers both emerges from and influences the social expectations we have in our day to day lives. They have become, as Paz noted, not an image of the world, but a realisation of a wish-fulfilment: the illusion is that they provide us with a means to gain access to and control experiences that would in earlier eras would have been regarded as excessive or unacceptable. We are encouraged, and our social processing increasingly demands that we seek out, ever more sensations and experiences, without questioning their value or the need we have for them. The experience in and of itself, separated from all that surrounds it, determines our rationale for existing. We take pleasure in the experience itself rather than where it has come from or where it will lead. This rapacity for the accumulation of experience and the things that encapsulate it, the openness to possibilities which are dazzling only in their lack of contextualization, leads to a profusion that is ultimately profoundly disappointing. There was, in the hippie years, a suggestion of a conspiracy to contaminate reservoirs with LSD, to turn all people on whether they wanted it or not. The realisation of a computer culture promises to deliver precisely this totalitarian illumination.

In this respect, we need to return to the work of Georges Bataille. Because if this sort of useless consumption seems precisely what he celebrated in his notion of expenditure, for Bataille such expenditure was justified not because it was useless, but by the fact that it was accompanied by loss. It is thus an error to believe that Bataille advocated or found anything to recommend about excess in itself; excess was celebrated by Bataille only as a manifestation of a human will to lose, only as a reflection of the anguish at the heart of human existence. This loss was what was fed back into society, a sign of generosity and a passage to intimacy.

Those making the more extravagant claims for the Internet even claim it can provide such intimacy: it transcends the difficulties of making personal contact in the fragmented modern world and restores the possibility of choice to the vagaries of personal encounters. While it would be foolish to deny that it may have considerable uses as an aid to communication, these are limited by the fact that such contact will be mediated by the machine. It will always lack any knowledge of intimacy, because the world the computer contains is a world of distance. It may be able to duplicate the feelings of sight and sound, it might even simulate smell or taste, but it will never be able to give more than an unsatisfactory representation of our most primary sense: touch. Touch is

the sense of intimacy and, ultimately, of genuine desire. This is not something that can be replicated for easy consumption. To establish genuine intimacy requires effort and sensitivity to the dynamics of anguish and loss which ultimately are the determinants of all human communication. It is in recognition of this fact, not as a prophet imbued with 'visions of excess', that the value of Bataille's analysis finally resides.

The impetus behind so much of computer propaganda is a strange Enlightenment faith in the efficacy of information as providing a panacea for society's ills. Typical is this statement in a recent article extolling the promise of the Internet against government attempts to restrict children's access to it: 'Our children would be exposed to myriad opinions, countless voices, alternative news angles and news stories. Immersed in a world of diversity and dissent our kids could develop their own values, their own political and moral positions'.[6] Oh really? That it can seriously be suggested that anyone – whether a child or not – could establish any sense of values from such myriad sources without any collective mediation seems incredible. Human freedom, indeed, has far more to fear from such a free-for-all than from any likely government censorship in today's society. We know that being unable to forget what is inessential debilitates the individual mind; we are today in danger of establishing the conditions for a collective inability to forget.

We are now living in a society that requires information to be consumed, a society that has placed its wager on the fact that it will be consumed, establishing a dynamic that depends upon presenting an excess of possibilities that can only be realised within a very limited frame of reference. This represents precisely a sort of 'conformism of excess' that characterises the modern attitude and emphasises the acceptance of revolt as othodoxy that Caillois brought to our attention. Speaking a quarter of a century ago of such a 'politics of terror' in relation to transgressive literature, George Steiner warned that: 'By hounding reserve out of our ways of speech, by making loud and public the dim places of feeling, we may be hacking up by their roots... indispensable forces of both poetry and Eros. Parading so openly, being so wastefully shared, our lives, and the language in which we experience them, go the more naked'.[7] Excessive, transgressive action takes its vitality from the restraint that is its condition of existence. To lose a sense of this dialectic could have dire consequences in ways that we cannot presently conceive.

Notes

[1] Roger Caillois 'Qu-est-ce que c'est le conformisme', *Chroniques de Babel* (Paris: Denoël, 1981).

[2] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Allan Stoekl (ed. and trans.) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

[3] As I write these words I hear on the news that the resurgence of the Japanese economy is being threatened by the reluctance of Japanese people to spend more lavishly.

[4] Interview with David Mamet, *The Guardian*, 19 February 2000.

[5] Octavio Paz 'The Channel and the Signs', *Alternating Current*, Helen R. Lane (trans.) (London: Wildwood House, 1974), p.160.

[6] Frank Fisher, 'Access denied', *Index On Censorship*, January 2000.

[7] George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers in Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp.97–8.

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Excess: An Obituary

Zygmunt Bauman

> *It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought, that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of recurrent impurity.*
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

To be 'in excess' means to be too many, or too much: too hot or too cold, too spicy or too bland, too tall or too short, too bold or too meek, too hard or too soft, too light or too dark, too frequent or too rare, too crowded or too empty... 'Too' signals that something is not really necessary, desirable or pleasing. 'Too' means *redundancy*; uselessness; waste.

The opposite of 'too' is 'just right'. Whenever the word 'too' is spoken an oblique tribute is tacitly paid to a standard, a norm, a just and proper measure. 'Too' signals disturbance, deviance or blunder, but just like the exceptions that prove the rule, the fact of redundancy reaffirms that things have their natural measures which fit them well. 'Too' says more than that, however. It seems to ask or command: 'take the excess away, and things will be as they should have been: comfortable, palatable, pleasing'. 'Too' is a call to restore order by passing the sentence of expulsion and banishment on whatever departs from the norm and spoils the preordained harmony. 'Too' is a call to action, with a promise of rest as the reward.

Excess can do what it does thanks to the pretence of being a marked member of the opposition: an 'abnormality' against the well-measured, balanced and equilibrated normality. The verdict of 'too much' or 'too many' derives its authority from the norm, which the excess ostensibly violates. If not for the norm, the sentence would sound hollow; neither would it stand in court. Norm is the foundation of excess; thanks to the excess invoking the norm as its foundation, the question of the foundation of the norm may be skipped or never asked. Excess needs a norm to make sense; norm, however, needs excess to exist (if only as an apparition).

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More to the point: rather than stating the obvious – that the idea of excess would be meaningless unless there was a norm – one should say that the idea of norm would never occur and would have no content were it not for the experience of excess. In the opposition between things excessive and things 'just right', excess, contrary to its pretences, is the prior, the un-marked member. The idea of 'norm' can solidify only as a sediment of excess. Were there no redundancy, the idea of usefulness would hardly be born. 'Too' is lying, when it says that were the 'excessive' taken away, the norm would be restored. The truth is that were the excesses out of the way, the void would yawn where the norms were supposed to reside.

Norm needs a repeated experience of excess particularly badly when its own legs are too weak or wobbly to stand on. Amidst the gaudy, colourful cavalcade of excesses, the ghost-like frailty of norm escapes notice. When norms lose their grip, order can rely only on excess for its continuing phantom-like existence. The order is a battlefield imagined beneath the graveyard of excesses; while 'excess' is the fleshy reincarnation of the deceased or unborn norm: the norm's life after death.

The death verdict on norms was never officially passed nor has ever reached the headlines, but the fate of the norm was sealed once from the chrysalis of the capitalist society of producers emerged the butterfly of society of consumers. This metaphor is faulty, though, since the passage in question was far from being as abrupt as the birth of a butterfly. It took a long time to notice that too much had changed for the emergent state of affairs to be viewed as a new and improved version of the old, and that the game was distinct enough to deserve a name of its own; but one can roughly locate the passage at the last quarter of the previous century, when Smith/Ricardo/Marx/Mill labour theory of value was challenged by Menger/Jevons/Walras marginal utility theory: when it had been said loud and clear that what endows things with value is not sweat needed to produce them nor self-renunciation necessary to obtain them, but a desire seeking satisfaction; when the ancient disagreement on who is the best judge of the value of things, the maker or the user, has been resolved in no ambiguous terms in favour of the user, and the question of the right to judge was blended with the issue of the value-authorship rights. Once that happened, it became clear that (as Jean-Joseph Goux put it) 'to create value, all that is necessary is, by whatever means possible, to create a sufficient intensity of desire' and that 'what ultimately creates surplus value is the manipulation of surplus desire'.[1]

Let us beware, though, of putting the cart before the horse. It would be silly to lay the blame for the wondrous producer-into-consumer trans-substantiation at the door of serene and detached Viennese, Liverpudlian and Lausannian scholars (one of whom was twice failed at his entry examinations to a Paris school because of innumeracy, and got himself a university job only thanks to private connections). Associating the birthday of consumer society with the publication dates of scholarly books is a matter of convenience, though not entirely unwarranted: these books did signal the belated or anticipatory, yet imminent awakening to the new reality. What these books did above all was to supply a language in which one could enclose and spell out the new rules of a new game by that time already well advanced and bound to grow and spread by its own momentum.

The early, 'heavy', production-obsessed capitalism was a civilisation of norms: the proverbial melting of solids was not carried out to make the world liquid, but in order to replace the old, worn-out and decaying frames with new ones – thoughtfully designed and cast in iron. Human 'needs' were seen after the image of norms: the right-and-proper state, any departure of which, whether upwards or downwards, should be promptly and at all costs repaired and best of all prevented; in a civilisation of norms, want is resented no less, but no more either than over-indulgence and luxury.

Bearing the character of norms, the needs could be measured and their 'sum total' computed. And once this had been done, the remaining trick was to produce goods in the quantity sufficient for the full satisfaction of needs; once needs are satisfied, economy will arrive at the 'steady state' and if properly managed will stay there. In the economic equation, needs were the constants and goods were the variable quantities; needs also *preceded* consumption, demand measured by needs was given before the supply of goods started, and so the volume of necessary goods could be defined precisely in advance. The boundary between the 'right amount' and excess could be clearly drawn. Towards the end of 'solid' capitalism era, Seebohm-Rowntree calculated scientifically the volume of poverty with the help of the basket of life-necessities. For tea (or, as Peter Townsend was to point out in a later and quite different era, for Christmas cards) there was no room in that basket. Tea has no nutritional value, and one can survive without exchanging Christmas cards with friends and the family; if economy is about churning out goods meant to satisfy the given needs and if the volume of needs is determined objectively, by the demands of survival, such things have no 'economic meaning'.

Reminding his readers that capitalism was also (perhaps first and foremost) a *bourgeois* civilisation, Jacques Ellul proceeds to define the 'bourgeois' by its paramount attribute: the ideology of *happiness*, a novelty in human history in as far as it entailed the idea of happiness as a universal human right, realistic purpose of life and main precept of life strategy. Happiness, Ellul points out, is 'typically individual, individualised, it rests in sensations, perceptions, emotions, desires of the individual'.[2] Happiness, let us note, is not a mere survival; as the guiding principle of life, it may even clash with the precepts of survival; survival would often advise abstention and self-restraint, while the desire for happiness may resent bounds and limits. Time and again happiness and survival find themselves at cross-purposes. If survival is a bridle, happiness is a spur. It prompts constant rebellion against the *status quo*. The paradox of happiness as life strategy is that this idea of ultimate satisfaction breeds perpetual disaffection with any 'has been' and constant rebellion against status quo. Survival is about sticking to the norm; happiness is an inherently anti-normative power. Survival dreams of ultimate rest and finds its fulfilment in standing still. But the moment of rest is the agony of happiness.

The three-centuries old history of the bourgeois civilisation called 'modern society' could be viewed as the story of gradual emancipation of happiness form the constraints of survival: both imaginative and normative constraints. But for the first half of modern history the energy generated by the urge of happiness poured into the mould designed by the norm of survival, and the imagery of happy life was

shaped after the pattern of survival: the dream of happiness took the form of longings after *a happy state*, a *steady* state of happiness; after a society at peace with itself because, finally, true to its potential of happiness production. A happy life looked as, first and foremost, a secure life, solidly founded and so durable, free from surprise and immune to accident; as a condition one could arrive at and stay in once arrived. Sigmund Freud's verdict that the 'state of happiness' is a pipe-dream, an impossibility or a contradiction in terms (an incongruence, which in Freud's view was bound to the immutable human constitution rather than being an idiosyncrasy of the wrong-footed civilisation) summarised the outcome of the war of emancipation aimed at apparently mistaken and misleading purposes. As life-guides, happiness and survival are incompatible. Survival, Freud pointed out, is about duration, while happiness needs transience. There is no such thing as a 'state of happiness'. There are only moments of happiness, and a life dedicated to the pursuit of happiness may be only a succession of happy moments.

Harvie Ferguson substitutes 'pleasure' for Ellul's 'happiness'. In his reading, 'Freud's patients suffered from the diseases of consumption'. The neurotics were excessively excitable; the psychotic, on the contrary, not excitable enough. Together, they 'serve to define a model of regulated insatiability; the ideal modern consumer or, better, the ideal consumer of modernity. In their open acceptance of the ephemeral and insubstantial, they celebrate the ''arbitrary, fleeting and transitory'' as the accidental relationship of selfhood'. This discovery, though, could only come as a hindsight wisdom: 'The bourgeois world believed itself, for a time, to be in possession of a uniquely ''rationalizing'' power . . . today, we are only too ready to congratulate ourselves upon outgrowing such rash optimism'.[3] We now celebrate what Freud still, sadly, diagnosed as morbid disease calling for therapy. We, for a change, celebrate what, deep down, we suffer from. We hope that the celebration will hush and stifle the pain. And the more we celebrate, the more pain there is clamouring to be silenced.

As Pierre Bourdieu famously put it, temptation and seduction have come to replace normative regulation and obtrusive policing as the principal means of system-construction and social integration. It is the norm-breaking (or rather the perpetual transcendence of norm, with a haste which denies the habits of the day time needed to congeal into norms) which is the main effect of temptation and the essence of seduction. And in the absence of norm, excess is life's only hope. Excess was born as a disease of life-towards-norm (a terminal disease, as it transpired); in the world devoid of norms, excess is the medicine for life-illnesses; perhaps the sole life-support available. Excess, that sworn enemy of the norm, has itself become the norm; perhaps the only norm there is. A curious norm to be sure, one escaping all definition. Having shattered normative fetters, excess lost its meaning. Nothing is excessive once excess is the norm.

Excess is what keeps the dream of happiness alive, and the dream of happiness is the flying-wheel of excess. This is because the pursuit of happiness, now as before the trade-mark of modernity, has no more a finishing line; no more a dream of arrival, but the urge to be forever on the move. The image of happiness is shaped in the likeness of a road-movie: a picaresque string of adventures, each new and exciting for its novelty, and novel and exciting because un-experienced, un-tested

and un-predicted; but each one wearing off quickly, shedding its charm the moment it has been tried and tasted. Fortunately, there is a bike, hopefully with a tankful of petrol, to move on. Excess is a promise that as long as the petrol lasts the string of new sensations will never run short of beads.

Each model of happiness has its own model discontents.

The bane of the first, now forsaken or forfeited model, was the irritating length of delay: the dreamed of bliss being a long distance away, time needed to reach it was unbearably long. That time was to be filled with labour, sweat and blood, self-denial and self-sacrifice; for all that suffering, the belief that the remaining stretch of the road gets shorter was the only reward. Well signed tracks, with the numbers of miles passed and those yet to be negotiated carved in heavy stones, were needed to make that belief credible and the reward comforting. Such tracks gave reassurance: but they offered no room for fantasy and denied both adventure and respite. This was a trade-off; it made the travellers parade each day with pride their confidence derived from secure itinerary – and bewail at night their forlorn freedom.

The new model of happiness is cursed with quite different torments. Time is no more a burden – it has shrunk to the non-dimensionality of moments. Reward comes instantaneously, if it comes at all. Gratification needs no more be delayed. But, curiously, with the waiting taken out of the wanting (as the advertising slogan of credit cards promised), wanting is all but impossible to gratify. What was hoped to bring gratification and made wanting so pleasurable, brings disappointment the moment it comes within grasp and is savoured, or shortly afterwards. After all, it is the excess of allurements that keeps the seeker of the 'arbitrary, fleeting and transitory' sensations going; excess is the sole ground on which, through a simple calculation of probability, one may safely rest the hope of the fount of pleasures never drying up. But the same excess portends perpetual and incurable anguish. In the words of Jacques Ellul, fear and anguish are nowadays the 'essential characteristics' of the 'Western man', as they are rooted in the 'impossibility to reflect on such an enormous multiplicity of options'.[4] Roads change directions, inflows, exits and directions of permitted traffic keep changing places, and newly fashionable land-rovers (those on four wheels, and even more so those composed of electric signals) have made beaten tracks and signed roads altogether redundant. New trade-off makes the wanderers cherish daily their freedom of movement and display proudly their speed and power of acceleration – and dream at nights of more security and self-confidence when it comes to deciding which turn to take and at what destination to aim.

Nowadays, wanderers must *experiment*; that is, whatever they do, cannot but be an experimentation. This is not the 'experiment' in its classic, by now old-fashioned sense: submitting one's reasoning to test of practice, finding out whether the hypothesis was right, and proving (or disproving, as the case may be) that a part of reality is indeed ruled by the regularities one supposed it to be ruled by. In the daily experimentation of the present-day wanderers nothing is to be proved (or disproved, as the case may be) except the wit and cunning of the experimenter, and there is no hypothesis to test. The substance of the trial is find out what can one do, given the tools, the raw stuff and the skills at one's disposal: nets are cast at random, hoping

for pleasant surprise of a yet unknown catch, and the more often the nets are cast the greater the chance of luck.

For the fate of excess this has far-reaching consequences. In the old-style experimenting one could calculate and budget the equipment and supplies of the laboratory: their kind and quantity were determined by the hypothesis one wished to test. No such budgeting makes much sense in the life of experimentation, since the larger is the supply and the more generously it is spent, the more likely it is that a promising spot, perhaps a goldmine, will be accidentally hit. Much of the supply, perhaps most of it, will bring no profit; but if not for the prodigality of expenditure, no win at all could be reasonably hoped for. When the ends are given and the task is to select the right means, one can calculate, economise, exercise prudence and self-restraint. What for instrumental-rational action was a merit, turns into vice or blunder when the ends themselves are the prime objective of experimentation.

As Heather Hopfl observed a few years ago, supply of excess is turning fast into the major concern of late-modern social life, and coping with excess is what passes in late-modern society for individual freedom – the only form of freedom men and women of our times know of.

'As the end of the 20th century approaches, there is an increasing preoccupation with the elaborate production, apparently to serve the interests of consumption, and proliferation of excess, of a promising liberating heterogeneity of choice and experience, of the construction and pursuit of sublime objects of desire. The construction of sublime artefacts, objects of desire, personalities, ''life styles'', styles of interaction, ways of acting, ways of constructing identity and so on becomes an oppressive drudgery masquerading as ever-extending choice. Matter fills up all space. Choice is bewildering illusion'.[5]

Illusion or not, these are the life conditions in which we have been cast – the one thing which is not for choice. Excess becomes a precept of reason. And so does waste. Excess does not seem excessive any more, nor does waste seem wasteful. The prime meaning of the 'excessive' and the 'wasteful' and the prime reason to resent them in the sober, coldly calculating mode of instrumental rationality is, after all, uselessness; but in the life of experimentation excess and waste are anything but useless – they are, indeed, the indispensable condition of the rational search of the ends. When excess becomes excessive? When the waste becomes wasteful? There is no obvious way of answering such questions, and most certainly no way to answer them in advance. One may bewail wasted years and excessive expenditures of energy and money, but one cannot tell excess from the right measure nor waste from the necessities before fingers are singed and the time of regret arrives.

When prodigality is the name of the game, the ability not to bother with these sort of questions becomes a most coveted value and the sign of social privilege. No more the 'ostentatious consumption' is the status mark of the high and mighty, but unworried and light-hearted waste. Like in Leonia, one of Italo Calvino's 'invisible cities', it is not the things produced or consumed, but things thrown each day out that signify genuine opulence.

Consumption is a once-for-all use of a resource; once consumed, the resource can be neither re-used nor recycled – as the asset for future exciting sensations it has been fully and truly *wasted*. Only when amassing things in *excess* of consumption one can keep their usefulness unscathed. Throwing things out confirms retrospectively the wisdom of excess: it helps to build confidence and reaffirms the link between self-assertion and wastefulness. Things thrown away are therefore promptly replaced by another, yet greater, 'spare potential', the 'just in case' surplus over and above the conceivable potential of consumption. The act of consumption marks the end of the road, while the trick is to keep forever on the move. Throwing things out reassures that one can go a long way yet and that one has enough, more than enough resources to negotiate it.

Waste shows that the capacity to move is the asset more important than the movement itself. As Richard Sennett observed, '[p]erfectly viable businesses are gutted and abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change'.[6] The major characterological traits of Bill Gates, commonly seen as the epitome of the new elite that 'flourishes in the midst of dislocation', are – Sennett notes – the 'lack of long-term attachment' and 'willingness to destroy what he has made'; Gates himself is keen to point out that the growth of technology business 'is marked by many experiments, wrong turns, and contradictions'.[7] Easy to get by, but easier still to get rid of – this seems to be the new formula of gambling-for-success. In the two-speak in which that formula makes sense, excess means right measure and wastefulness means being creative and productive.

In the chase of happiness, long-term is an abomination. Durability of things, and even more the durability of attachment to things, turns to be the true waste, the sole waste that genuinely frightens and repels: waste of opportunities, and above all of the yet-unexplored and un-imagined opportunities. Transience of things and commitments is the asset; long-term engagement a liability. And if this is the case, excess is an empty notion. Nothing is 'too much', except the resentment of 'too much'.

Notes

[1] Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Jennifer Curtiss Bage (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.200, p.202.
[2] Jacques Ellul, *Metarmophose du bourgeois* (Paris: La table ronde, 1998 [1867]), p.79, p.83.
[3] Harvie Ferguson, *The Science of Pleasure: Cosmos and Psyche in the Bourgeois World View* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.261, p.247.
[4] Ellul, *Metarmophose*, p.277.
[5] Heather Hopfl, 'The Melancholy of the Black Widow', in Kevin Hetherington and Rolland Munro (eds.), *Ideas of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.236–237.
[6] Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p.51.
[7] Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, p.62.

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The Re-Generation

Cathryn Vasseleu

Adopting a baby from another country has become reasonably common practice among the citizens of some affluent nations, but few who do so would consider that they are participating in the global extension of the economic rationale of recycling to human reproduction.[1] We tend to think of recycling as an environmental issue concerned with the finitude of natural resources, as a way of life, a style of sustainable consumption, or a view of history that is concerned with the conservation and renewability of cultural and intellectual resources. We do not tend to think of recycling as an attitude towards procreation. The very idea brings to mind an episode of the British television comedy series *Absolutely Fabulous*, in which 'Edina Monsoon' – played by Jennifer Saunders – adopts a clutch of the world's surplus babies in her manic acquisition of the latest fashion statement. In that episode, to her daughter Saffron's infuriation and disgust, all trace of parental feeling is expended by 'Eddy' in an utterly indiscriminate dispensing of maternal largesse to a growing torrent of hapless mail-order Romanian infants. The text that follows will explore transnational adoption as a form of recycling, and pursue wasted expenditure as a phenomenon that lies at its heart. Putting aside the image of Edina Monsoon's jaundiced profligacy as a salutary but extreme example, the discussion will focus on the legal adoption of babies born in China by American citizens over the last decade.

Child Adoption From China

Since 1989 there have been over 7,000 adoptions from China to the United States alone, almost all of them baby girls. Now approaching an annual rate in excess of 4,000 per year, these outstrip adoptions from other nations, including Korea, Russia, Romania, Vietnam and countries in Latin-America. There are over a hundred Chinese adoption agencies, based mainly in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom, and a massive amount of information about infant Chinese adoption is available on the web-site of an organization called 'Families with Children from China'. Individual web-sites exist for chapters of the organization that are located all over North America. Another US-based organization, 'Our Chinese Daughters Foundation', has a web-site that provides advice and support for prospective and post-adoption parents. There are web-sites handling books for families, relatives and friends, and even web-sites where adopting parents can shop for genuine Chinese peasant paintings, decorative plates, kites, quilts, calendars and traditional children's clothing.

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The 'Families With Children from China' web-site states that the organization has three goals. These are: (1) to support families who have adopted in China – through post-adoption and Chinese culture programs; (2) to encourage adoption from China, and support families preparing to do so; and (3) to advocate for and support children remaining in orphanages in China.[2] These goals reflect in part the group's understanding and acceptance of China's rationale for its current adoption policy, which the group regards as being directed more towards internal demands on its orphanages than to the demands of adopting parents. The Chinese policy is very liberal with respect to overseas adoption. Would-be parents can apply as couples or as single men and women, and there are no age restrictions.

Adopting parents pay the orphanage a fee of several thousand dollars before collecting their baby (as well as paying for their own airfares, accommodation and legal expenses). The fee is used to assist in the financial support of all the children in the orphanage's care, including handicapped children. Some people who have adopted children post stories of their experiences on web-sites, and there have been a number of high profile reports and interviews in the popular press and media in North America.[3] By way of contrast, adoption of Chinese babies by foreigners is a sensitive issue that is not publicly broadcast within China. Adopting parents are not necessarily childless couples. Individuals with and without children, and fertile and infertile couples have chosen this form of adoption. Reasons stated for choosing to adopt a baby from China vary widely, but by far the most commonly stated reason is ready availability.

My consideration of transnational adoption as a global form of recycling will be confined to the material that has been made public by adopting parents in the United States. It is an approach that leaves off short of many of the fields into which the practice extends. For example, while proposing a connection between institutionalized recycling practices in the United States, changes in reproductive consciousness and attitudes towards adoption, I am making no attempt in this paper to add to commentary on or analyze the institutional structures within which the Chinese adoption policy has taken shape. While not the subject of the paper, issues that are inextricably related to these structures, such as embodied rights, gender persecution, colonialist categories, and theories of woman in Chinese institutions, political economy and cultural history are the subject of a broad field of anthropological, feminist and post-colonialist inquiry that foregrounds their cultural specificity.[4] I will however address the practice in relation to recent statistical analyses of changing patterns of female births and sex ratios in China.[5]

As is well-known, China is currently experiencing an escalation in the proportion of young females missing statistically, that has been caused in large part, by a massive increase in sex-selective abortion. Although the identification of embryonic sex is strictly forbidden by the same governmental authorities which enforce the compulsory one child family planning policy that was introduced in 1979, this identification is frequently made through ultrasound machines operated by technicians who often know and are sympathetic to the wishes of the parents. According to the report of statisticians, a quiet sign from the technician to the watching parents is all that it takes for a decision to abort to be made.[6] The Chinese press carries many stories

and editorials criticizing female infanticide and abortion, and expressing fears that it will lead to a danger in the balance of the sexes. However, the existence of a birth control policy, which is failing in its own design to control the population in a desirable way, is not an adequate explanation for parents choosing to abort female pregnancies. Similar statistical trends exist for Korea, where there is no coercive one-child policy.[7]

Poverty is playing a significant role in the rise in the number of Korean children left in private orphanages and state care, and is a contributory factor in sex-selective abortion by couples who want sons in order to continue family blood lines. It is clear that in both China and Korea a variety of socio-historical, economic, and technological factors are playing a part in the statistically verifiable preference for male children. The one child policy in China has made this preference eminently more visible, rather than been its underlying cause.

While the number of female infants born in China is falling statistically, once born, the number available for adoption is rising significantly. There are many forms of adoption known and practised historically within China, and a general tolerance of the social reality that some parents are not able to raise their own children.[8] With the introduction of the one-child policy, adoption was limited to childless couples, and even then only to a single, handicapped child or orphan. However, with official numbers of orphans reaching 100,000, and unofficial estimates running to millions, adoption laws were relaxed in November 1998 to allow Chinese couples to adopt more than one child, regardless of whether they had children or not.

Adoption is a recognized means of establishing legal kinship in most countries. In the countries of would-be adopting parents, there are added complications, such as legally contested surrogacy arrangements and discrimination against single, older and same-sex parents. Transracial adoption within national borders is also under critical scrutiny among those adversely affected by it. In Australia for example, the issue has gained national prominence with public revelations about the 'Stolen Generation' of indigenous Australians, forcibly removed as babies from their families and adopted into white homes as a matter of previous government policy. However, for the purposes of my argument, I am distinguishing between two kinds of adoption; adoption that requires transnational co-operation and legal processes of naturalization, and adoption of all types which does not involve the re-negotiation of citizenship as a natural right. As I will explain, I am proposing that only the former adoption practice is underlined by the same principles of resource recovery that operate in the recycling cultures into which the children are being adopted.

Recycling Babies

Walter Moser has argued that while recycling is associated with an array of heterogeneous terms, including reutilization, rewriting, reinvention, revamping, remaking and revival, there are a number of specific historical factors which have conditioned the emergence of a treatment of artistic, cultural and historical materials for which he would reserve the term 'recycling'. These include the commodification

of cultural objects and products, the production and industrial reproduction of art objects, the technologisation of the means of production and reproduction, and globalization in the postcolonial context.[9] The treatment of orphaned infants can be addressed within the gambit of cultural recycling insofar as the emergence of transnational adoption has been conditioned by a number of these factors, witnessed particularly in the technologisation, commodification and global scale of the practice.

A questionable effect which transnational adoption is perilously close to producing when the practice is viewed as baby recycling is the implication that the babies are the leftovers of reproductive expenditure. My interest in discussing this is directed towards the irredeemable aspects of a practice that is also unquestionably based on a heart-felt commitment towards the foundling children by both carers in orphanages and adopting parents. In mind in my discussion, although not its object, is Georges Bataille's much debated and revisited distinction between the utilitarian rationality of 'restricted economy' (based on usefulness, fulfillment of needs and preservation) as the determinant of cultural values; and a 'general economy' that finds in occasions of aimless, unproductive expenditure (extravagant waste, needless consumption, luxury, war, revolt, sumptuary displays and sacrifice) the discovery and celebration of the sacred values that animate cultural life.[10]

Transnational adoption does not simply imply the recovery (as in rescue) of new-born human life but rather, the renewal of value through the recovery of a familial relation, or blood tie, or life-giving connection. In telling their stories adopting parents focus, reasonably enough, on their first meeting with their babies. Adopting parents relate their profound anxieties and self doubts about making enduring commitments to a complete stranger, and express wonder at the powerful bond they feel forming after being given their child. Such stories make us almost forget that there is always an involuntary element in the sacrificial action of parents who give their children up to fate. A trace of this involuntary element remains in the official use of the word 'orphan' rather than 'abandoned baby' in reference to these children. There is an unspeakable loss to be borne in the calculation of a baby's value, but the terms of the calculation for which the parents are responsible are not of their own making.

The dis/connection between responsibility for the begetting of life and the calculation of its value is made more absolute in the contemporary parlance of kinship relations used among social workers, psychologists and counsellors. By way of establishing the grounds for cultural redemption, the orphaned children are deemed to possess an identifying 'birth culture'.[11] In the same way that 'birth' has come to replace 'natural' in the proliferation of forms of motherhood (birth mother, rearing mother, surrogate mother etc), 'birth culture' replaces 'country of origin', and indicates the baby's human nature, or a humanity which originates culturally rather than being naturally given. The acquisition of citizenship in an 'adopted culture' is a 'birth' that takes on an artificial nature in a bond of naturalization, where an original culture is memorialized.

A proportion of parents who adopt a Chinese baby do so in preference to having a baby of their own. The preference is sometimes expressed as the choice to give a new life or better life-style to an already existing child rather than reproducing

a new one. The underlying rationale of such a choice approaches that of recycling. However, as already mentioned, there is a potentially undesirable aspect to the perceived benefit, inasmuch as it also carries the attendant risk of treating human life as reappropriable waste. Elsewhere this implication is being manifestly realized, for example, in the trend towards the replacement of permanent employment by casual labor and other current corporate employment strategies, where rather than having a single lifetime, one individual can have many lives, as a disposable/ retrainable labor resource. The carers of infants in China and many of the adopting parents are very mindful of the implication and concerned to avoid it, emphasizing instead the support, love and care given to the babies, and their profound change of fortune upon adoption. Nevertheless, the adoption and naturalization into a new culture is a renewal that has within it the disappearing traces of a superfluous original being.

A commonly expressed concern of adopting parents is the need to preserve and keep alive the severed birth culture within the psychical formation of an adopted child. This concern follows from and sanitizes the implication considered above. The amount of significance that should or should not be placed on fostering this other cultural tie is discussed with varying degrees of concern in published stories by adopting parents. Introducing an adopted daughter to other (often expatriate) Chinese people, encouraging her to learn the languages, or encouraging an interest in Chinese culture through books and images, is to also confer a mnemonic power on those same people, languages, and books – aiding the recall of a common cultural inheritance possessed by them and the adopted child. As well as giving an adopted daughter a new life, some adoptive parents express the hope that the child can also be given back something of herself; not just a future, but an authenticity that she lost out on in being given a new life.

Transnational Adoption And Reproductive Consciouness

From the discussion above, it is apparent that the popularity of transnational adoption in the United States is motivated by something other than economic factors such as easy availability and the pressures of human reproduction on environmental sustainability. Also of secondary significance is the benefit to the Clinton administration of a practice that conveniently communicates a humanitarian message that underscores United States policy towards China as both a violator of human rights and a solicited trading partner. Most telling of all perhaps on the humanitarian score is the lack of interest in the adoption of foundling Chinese babies with disabilities, or closer to home, the adoption of orphaned Amerasian offspring of American servicemen, despite government legislation designed to facilitate their resettlement in America.[12] Instead of compliance with utilitarian and humanitarian motivations, the persistence of an element of superfluousness in transnational adoption deserves closer attention.

Another implication that can be drawn from the recycling of babies is that it fosters the idea of transnational adoption as luxury, particularly the luxury of an instant family: 'An adoption in China...and an American family is born'. In the extension

of the rationale of recycling to orphaned babies, recycling lends itself to adopting parents as a form of reproductive technology. By this I do not simply mean spectacular high-tech material breakthroughs such as the use of stem cells taken from frozen human embryos to grow livers and other organs, which is quite literally a recycling of procreative waste. Transnational adoption can be included among the likes of techniques such as AID (artificial insemination by donor), in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, cloning and transgenic manipulation inasmuch as it is altering the patterns and possibilities of parenting.

Mary O'Brien has argued that reproduction is not a purely biological process but a dialectical one that has undergone significant historical change.[13] This has been witnessed for example in the transformation of reproductive consciousness with the discovery of physiological paternity and the development of contraceptive technologies. The transformation of reproductive consciousness through the contemporary treatment of reproduction as a cultural technique has been addressed by Judith Roof.[14] Transnational adoption is another case in point. In transnational adoption, the reproduction of reproduction is achieved by the paradoxical use of a conservative technique – a parental bond that is made by law. The same is true of what might appear to be genetically based parenthood. The attribution of paternity rights in the case of artificial insemination by donor (AID) is a classic case of progenitor-status that is created by law. Paternity is established by the principle of substituting a legal relationship for a biological or natural one. The man whose semen is donated is presumed not to be the father, while a husband or de facto partner is recognized as the legal father. It is arguable that in law, fatherhood has always been a legally rather than a naturally determined relationship.

The law's participation in the alteration of reproductive consciousness is taking a curious twist in the United States new 'kid-crazy' celebrity world, where adoption by single female stars is a much-publicized trend.[15] Another trend is the rise of internet-based adoption agencies as an avenue for advertising children who are available for adoption. The advantages of adoption over natural birth that are commonly cited by female celebrities include the saving of time and the avoidance of a clash in the coincidence of career and child-making years. Kirstie Alley explained that it wasn't the pregnancy she craved but the baby.[16] In a strange demonstration of gender parity, the law has become a preferred luxury-delivery mode of progenitor-status to women who can avoid wasting valuable career-making time by becoming the mother of a ready-made baby.

Commodity babies aside, the ease and increasing occurrence of transnational adoption by individuals in wealthy nations is indicative of a change in consciousness within such countries about reproduction – a phenomenon which, since the technical advances of reproductive technologies, is no longer held sacred in nature. With transnational adoption, the technique for becoming a parent is not necessarily easy, but it is a luxury available to any adult with resources such as computer skills, internet access, sufficient money, education, readily available legal facilities, financial assistance by corporate employers, appropriate domestic adoption laws, and, in the case of the United States, a hypertrophied Immigration and Naturalisation Service bureaucracy.

However, despite the use of recycling as a way of altering the patterns and possibilities of parenting, the luxurious element of transnational adoption is nothing like the preservative circularity of reproductive expenditure.[17] Instead, the luxury of having the choice and availability of adoption as an alternative to reproduction can be expressed, to use Bataille's terminology, as giving the perverse alternative a sovereign rather than meaningful worth. In short, 'luxurious use confers on [the adopted infants] the value that loss has in the sphere of productive wealth'.[18]

From the perspective of a consumer culture in which recycling is domestic policy, transnational adoption somehow conflates and refuses the image of a child left in a dumpster and a child left on the doorstep of the rich. Just as it recovers the baby, recycling throws up an unpalatable conception, which leads back to a maternal labor that has ended in an act of sacrifice. This contemporary instance of abandonment and giving gives cause to turn once again to feminine sacrifice, and its place in Bataille's speculations as well as the shaping of attitudes towards procreation. Our Chinese daughters are the byproduct of a reproductive order that is geared to the production of a thing of calculable value, that is, to the conception of a male child. This mechanism of evaluation, forced on many by socioeconomic factors and fostered by the commodification of humanity within global capitalism, has disordering effects that cannot be recuperated. But between the intolerability of the unconscionable waste and the impossibility of its neutralization, there is renewed scope within the context of each of the cultures that are party to its generation, for raising the question of how else to conceive of a girl.

Notes

[1] A version of this text was presented at *Recycling Culture*, convened by Mieke Bal at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University, April 1997. Research assistance from Juliana Stolarova was funded by The Society for the Humanities. I would also like to formally thank to Debra Fried, Shelley Wong, Natalie Melas, and Kate Gilroy for their vital contributions.

[2] Families with Children from China; http://www.fwcc.org

[3] As well as television programs such as a CNN Special, 'Beijing '95 A place for women-Day 10-Part 3', Program n577 (13 September 1995), articles in the United States printed media include Tama Janowitz, 'Bringing home baby', *Vogue* 186,10 (1996), pp.90–102; Bruce Porter, 'I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital', *The New York Times Magazine* (11 April 1993), pp.24–27, p.31, pp.44–45; Jill Smolowe, 'Saving the Orphans', *Time*, (22 January 1996), p.41; and Claudia Glenn Dowling, 'An adoption in China...and an American family is born', *Life* 19,6 (May 1996), pp.27–34.

[4] These studies include Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Tani E. Barlow, 'Theorizing woman: Funü, Guoja, Jiating (Chinese woman, Chinese state, Chinese family)', in *Body, Subject & Power in China*, Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (eds) (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.253–89; Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, Tyrene White (eds), *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994); Emily M. Ahern, 'The Power and pollution of Chinese women', in *Women in Chinese Society*, Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (eds) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp.193–214; Charlotte Beahan, 'Feminism and nationalism in the Chinese women's press', *Modern China* 1,4 (1975), pp.379–417.

[5] Ansley J. Coale and Judith Banister, 'Five decades of missing females in China', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 140,4 (December 1996), pp.421–450.

[6] Coale and Banister, 'Five decades of missing females in China', p.446.

[7] Coale and Banister, 'Five decades of missing females in China', p.447.

[8] See for example Françoise Lauwaert, 'Abandon, adoption, liaison. Réflexions sur l'adoption thérapeutique en Chine traditionnelle', L'Homme 137, janv-mars (1996), pp.143–161; and Albert Richard O'Hara, 'Adopted daughters', *Journal of the China Society* 13 (1976), pp.17–19.

[9] Walter Moser, 'Le recyclage culturel', in *Recyclages: Economies de l'appropriation culturelle*, Claude Dionne, Silvestra Mariniello and Walter Moser (eds) (Montréal: Les Editions Balzac, 1996), pp.23–49, pp.35–38.

[10] See for example Bataille's most influential essay, 'The notion of expenditure', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Allan Stoekl (trans. and ed.) (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp.116–129.

[11] Barbara C. Trolley, Julia Wallin and James Hansen, 'International adoption: issues of acknowledgment of adoption and birth culture', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 12 (December 1995), pp.465–479.

[12] See Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.132–136. For discussion of conflicting invocations of human rights with respect to the negotiation of relations between China and the United States, see Jacqueline Bhabha, 'Embodied rights: gender persecution, state sovereignty, and refugees', *Public Culture*, 9 (1996), pp.3–32.

[13] Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

[14] Judith Roof, *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

[15] Jackie Rogers, 'Baby fever strikes Hollywood', *Redbook*, 114 (Feb, 1995), pp.76–8, pp.114–116.

[16] Jackie Rogers, 'Baby fever strikes Hollywood', p.114.

[17] See *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Mary Dalwood (trans.) (San Franscisco, City Lights Books, 1986); and *The Accursed Share: An Essay On General Economy*, Volume II & III, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

[18] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p.126.

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The Excesses of Globalisation and the Feminisation of Survival[1]

Saskia Sassen

We are seeing the formation of new economies of excess linked to globalisation: the formation of a global capital market that dwarfs global GNP and global trade, the disproportionate concentration of wealth in limited numbers of firms and in limited numbers of individuals, stock market valuations that are hundreds of times the actual profitability of a firm. All of these are by now familiar and have received considerable attention. In this article I want to focus on conditions that can be thought of as yet another set of economies of excess linked to globalisation but not usually considered alongside the factors listed above. These are economies of excess constituted on the back of the poor and the powerless. They are emerging from the desperate survival strategies of a growing number of poor, from the illegal and merciless ways of profit-making using the poor by those seeking to make money no matter what, and from the often heavy reliance by governments on the remittances of their hard working low-wage emigrants and trafficked workers to obtain foreign exchange reserves.

One feature that stands out is the growing presence of women over the last decade in a variety of very diverse cross-border circuits constitutive of these economies of excess. These circuits include the illegal trafficking in people for the sex industry and for various types of formal and informal labour markets. But they also include the movement of refugees and immigrants, both documented and not. The evidence for any of these flows is incomplete and partial, yet there is a growing consensus among experts that these flows are increasing and that women are often a majority, including in flows that used to be mostly male. We also know that prostitution is on the rise as a way for workers to earn a living and for entrepreneurs to make a profit; that there is an increase in the employment of women as domestic servants; and that in both of these it is more and more frequently foreign women who are the workers. All of these conditions have emerged as factors in the lives of a growing number of women from developing or struggling economies. These are, in many ways, old conditions. What is different today is the rapid growth and the rapid internationalisation of these conditions.

The particular aspect explored in this article concerns the possibility of systemic links between the growth of these alternative circuits for survival and for profit-making, on the one hand, and major impacts of economic globalisation on developing countries, on the other. In the larger project from which this paper is derived, I have

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conceptualised these alternative circuits for survival and profit making as 'countergeographies of globalisation'. They are either not represented or seen as connected to globalisation or they actually operate outside, and possibly in opposition to its formal frameworks. Yet, I posit that they are deeply imbricated in some of the major dynamics constitutive of globalisation in at least two ways. One of these is that they are partly a strategy of responding and counteracting some of the key programmes and conditionalities imposed on developing and struggling economies in the context of economic globalisation.[2] The second is that the internationalising of some of these circuits – many of which preceded globalisation – and the formation of new ones have been made possible by the existence of the technical and institutional infrastructure of the global economic system.[3] This infrastructure supports and makes possible cross-border flows and global markets originally intended for legal operations. They are now increasingly used for illegal operations of all sorts.

In this article I use the growing empirical literature produced by researchers and activists from around the world which documents various aspects of the broader argument. This includes literature on illegal trafficking, immigrant remittances, and the impact that the enormous costs of government debt in struggling economies have on the poor, especially women. I would hope that the larger conceptual architecture I am trying to develop would be helpful in situating even minor bits of information on these various issues and thereby enhance their power to illuminate the broader systemic dynamic at work. It should also help us to see how what are often experienced and represented as micro-events or local specificities can enter the macro-level of economic dynamics. It is a way of maximising the meaning and value of the enormous work being done by activists and scholars to document and fight against abuse and injustice, work that is always at risk of invisibility or categorisation as a particularity rather than one element in a broader macrolevel system.

Mapping a New Conceptual Landscape

The variety of global circuits that are incorporating growing numbers of women have strengthened at a time when major dynamics linked to economic globalisation have had significant impacts on developing economies. While these economies are frequently grouped under the label developing, they are in some cases struggling or stagnant and even shrinking. For the sake of brevity I will use developing as shorthand for this variety of situations. The latter have had to implement a bundle of new policies and accommodate new conditions associated with globalisation: Structural Adjustment Programmes, the opening up of these economies to foreign firms, the elimination of multiple state subsidies, and, it would seem almost inevitably, financial crises and particular types of programmatic solutions. It is now clear that in most of the countries involved, whether Mexico or South Korea, these conditions have created enormous costs for certain economic sectors and have not fundamentally reduced government debt.

Among these costs are prominently, the growth in unemployment, the closure of a large number of firms in often fairly traditional sectors oriented to the local or national market, the replacement of survival agriculture and food production for

local or national markets with export-oriented cash crops, and, finally, the ongoing and increasingly heavy burden of government debt in most of these economies.

Are there systemic links between these two sets of developments – the growing presence of women from developing economies in the variety of global circuits described above and the rise in unemployment and debt in those same economies? One way of articulating this question in substantive terms is to posit that: (a) the shrinking opportunities for male employment in many of these countries, (b) the shrinking opportunities for more traditional forms of profit-making in these same countries as they increasingly accept foreign firms in a widening range of economic sectors and are pressured to develop export industries, and (c) the associated shrinking revenues for the governments in these countries, have (d) all contributed to raise the importance of alternative ways of making a living, making a profit, and securing government revenue. Prostitution and labour migration are growing in importance as ways of making a living; illegal trafficking in women and children for the sex industry and in labourers is growing in importance as ways of making a profit; and the remittances sent by emigrants, as well as the organised export of workers are increasingly important sources of revenues for some of these governments. Women are by far the majority group in prostitution and in trafficking for the sex industry, and they are becoming a majority group in migration for labour. These are all economies of excess.

Debt and debt servicing problems have become a systemic feature of the developing world since the 1980s.[4] They are, in my reading, also a systemic feature inducing the formation of these alternative circuits for survival and profit-making. There is considerable research showing the detrimental effects of such debt on government programmes for women and children, notably education and health care – clearly investments necessary to ensure a better future.[5] Further, the increased unemployment typically associated with the austerity and adjustment programs implemented by international agencies to address government debt have also been found to have adverse effects on women.[6] Unemployment, both of women themselves but also more generally of the men in their households, has added to the pressure on women to find ways to ensure household survival. Subsistence food production, informal work, emigration and prostitution have all grown as survival options for women.[7]

Heavy government debt and high unemployment have brought with them the need to search for survival alternatives; and the shrinking of regular economic opportunities has brought with it a widened use of illegal profit-making by enterprises and organisations. In this regard, heavy debt burdens play an important role in the formation of alternative circuits for survival, profit-making and government revenue enhancement. Economic globalisation has to some extent added to the rapid increase in certain components of this debt and it has provided an institutional infrastructure for cross-border flows and global markets. We can see economic globalisation as facilitating the operation of these circuits at a global scale.[8]

Generally, most countries which became deeply indebted in the 1980s have not been able to solve this problem. And in the late 1990s we saw a whole new set of countries

become deeply indebted. According to UNCTAD, the number of very poor countries has increased from 25, 10 years ago to 41 in 1999. Over the last two decades many innovations were launched, most importantly by the IMF and the World Bank through their Structural Adjustment Programmes and Structural Adjustment Loans, respectively. The latter were tied to economic policy reform rather than the funding of a particular project. The purpose of such programmes is to make states more 'competitive', which typically means sharp cuts in various social programmes.

These various circuits can be thought of as feminising survival, because it is increasingly on the backs of women that these forms of making a living, making a profit and securing government revenue are realised. To the latter we can add the additional government revenue coming from the severe cuts in health care and education that are often part of the effort of making the state more competitive as demanded by Structural Adjustment Programmes and other policies linked to the current phase of globalisation. These types of cuts are generally recognised as hitting women particularly hard insofar as women are responsible for the health and education of household members. Thus in using the notion of feminisation of survival I am not only referring to the fact that households and indeed whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival. I want to emphasise the fact that also governments are dependent on women's earnings in these various circuits, and so are types of enterprises whose ways of profit-making exist at the margins of what we think of as the economy, even as they are growing rapidly as a source of profit in these troubled economies.

Alternative Circuits for Survival

It is against this context of what I would consider a systemic condition marked by high unemployment, poverty, bankruptcies of large numbers of firms, and shrinking resources in the state to meet social needs, that alternative circuits of survival emerge and can be seen as articulated with those conditions. Here I want to focus on some of the data on the trafficking of women for sex industries and for work; the growing weight of this trafficking as a profit making option; and the growing weight of remittances sent by migrants in the account balance of many of the sending states.

Trafficking in women

Trafficking involves the forced recruitment and/or transportation of people within and across states for work or services through a variety of forms all involving coercion. Trafficking is a violation of several distinct types of rights: human, civil, and political. Trafficking is related to the sex market, to labour markets, to illegal migration. Much legislative work has been done to address trafficking: international treaties and charters, UN resolutions, and work by various bodies and commissions.[9] NGOs are also playing an increasingly important role.[10]

Trafficking in women for the sex industry is highly profitable for those running the trade. The United Nations estimates that 4 million people were trafficked in 1998,

producing a profit of $US 7 billion to criminal groups.[11] These funds include remittances from prostitutes earnings and payments to organisers and facilitators in these countries. In Japan, profits in the sex industry are about 4.2 trillion yen per year. In Poland, police estimate that for each Polish woman delivered, the trafficker receives about $US 700. In Australia, the Federal Police estimate that the cash flow from 200 prostitutes is up to $US 900,000 a week.[12] Ukrainian and Russian women, highly prized in the sex market, earn the criminal gangs involved about US$ 500 to US$ 1000 per woman delivered. These women can be expected to service on average 15 clients a day, and each can be expected to make about $US 215,000 per month for the gang.[13]

It is estimated that in recent years several million women and girls are trafficked within and out of Asia and the former Soviet Union, two major trafficking areas.[14] Growth in both these areas can be linked to women being pushed into poverty or sold to brokers due to the poverty of their households or parents. High unemployment in the former Soviet republics has been one factor promoting growth of criminal gangs as well as growth of trafficking in women. Unemployment rates among women in Armenia, Russia, Bulgaria and Croatia reached 70% and in Ukraine 80% with the implementation of market policies. There is some research indicating that economic need is the bottom line for entry into prostitution.[15]

Trafficking in migrants is also a profitable business. According to a UN report, criminal organisations in the 1990s generated an estimated $US 3.5 billion per year in profits from trafficking migrants generally (not just women).[16] In June 2000 Interpol released an estimate of $20 billion in profits for 1999 through the smuggling of immigrant workers. The entry of organised crime is a recent development in the case of migrant trafficking. Before it was more petty criminals. There are also reports that organised crime groups are creating intercontinental strategic alliances through networks of co-ethnics throughout several countries; this facilitates transport, local contact and distribution, provision of false documents, etc. The Global Survival Network reported on these practices after a two-year investigation beginning in 1997 using the establishment of a dummy company to enter the illegal trade.[17] Such networks also facilitate the organised circulation of trafficked women among third countries – not only from sending to receiving countries. Traffickers may move women from Burma, Laos, Vietnam and China to Thailand, while Thai women may have been moved to Japan and the US.[18]

There is, in my reading, also a particular site for excess in the enforcement logic common in highly developed countries. For immigration policies and enforcement may well contribute to make women who are victims of trafficking even more vulnerable and give them little recourse to the law. If they are undocumented, which they are likely to be, they will not be treated as victims of abuse but as violators of the law insofar as they have violated entry, residence and work laws. The attempt to address undocumented immigration and trafficking through greater border controls over entry, raises the likelihood that women will use traffickers to cross the border, and some of these may turn out to belong to criminal organisations linked to the sex industry.

Further, in many countries prostitution is forbidden for foreign women, which further enhances the role of criminal gangs in prostitution. It also diminishes one of the survival options of foreign women who may have limited access to jobs generally. Prostitution is tolerated for foreign women in many countries while regular labour market jobs are less so – this is the case for instance in the Netherlands and in Switzerland. According to IMO data, the number of migrant women prostitutes in many EU countries is far higher than that for nationals: 75% in Germany, 80% in the case of Milan in Italy, etc.

While some women know that they are being trafficked for prostitution, for many the conditions of their recruitment and the extent of abuse and bondage only become evident after they arrive in the receiving country. The conditions of confinement are often extreme, akin to slavery, and so are the conditions of abuse, including rape and other forms of sexual violence and physical punishment. They are severely underpaid, and wages are often withheld. They are prevented from using protection methods to prevent against AIDS, and typically have no right to medical treatment. If they seek police help they may be taken into detention because they are in violation of immigration laws; if they have been provided with false documents there are criminal charges.[19]

As tourism has grown sharply over the last decade and become a major development strategy for cities, regions and whole countries, the entertainment sector has seen a parallel growth and recognition as a key development strategy.[20] In many places, the sex trade is part of the entertainment industry and has similarly grown.[21] At some point it becomes clear that the sex trade itself can become a development strategy in areas with high unemployment and poverty and governments desperate for revenue and foreign exchange reserves. When local manufacturing and agriculture can no longer function as sources of employment, of profits and of government revenue, what was once a marginal source of earnings, profits and revenues now becomes a far more important one. This increased importance of these sectors in development generates growing tie-ins. For instance, when the IMF and the World Bank see tourism as a solution to some of the development impasses in many poor countries and provide loans for its development, they may well be contributing to the development of a broader institutional setting for the expansion of the entertainment industry and indirectly of the sex trade. This tie-in with development strategies signals that trafficking in women may well see a sharp expansion.

The entry of organised crime into the sex trades, the formation of cross-border ethnic trafficking networks, and the growing transnationalization in so many aspects of tourism, suggests that we are likely to see further development of a global sex industry. This could mean greater attempts to enter into more and more 'markets' and a general expansion of the industry. It is a worrisome possibility especially in the context of growing numbers of women with few if any employment options. And such growing numbers are to be expected given high unemployment and poverty, the shrinking of a world of work opportunities that were embedded in the more traditional sectors of these economies, and the growing debt burden of governments rendering them incapable of providing social services and support to the poor.

Women in the sex industry become – in certain kinds of economies – a crucial link supporting the expansion of the entertainment industry and through that, tourism as a development strategy which in turn becomes a source of government revenue. These tie-ins are structural, not a function of conspiracies. Their weight in an economy will be raised by the absence or limitations of other sources for securing a livelihood, profits and revenues for respectively workers, enterprises and governments.

Remittances

Women and migrants generally, enter the macro-level of development strategies through yet another channel: the sending of remittances which in many countries represent a major source of foreign exchange reserves for the government. In 1998 global remittances sent by immigrants to their home countries reached over $US 70 billion. To understand the significance of this figure, it should be related to the GDP and foreign currency reserves in the specific countries involved, rather than compared to the global flow of capital. For instance, in the Philippines, a key sender of migrants generally and of women for the entertainment industry in several countries, remittances represented the third largest source of foreign exchange over the last several years. In Bangladesh, another country with significant numbers of its workers in the Middle East, Japan, and several European countries, remittances represent about a third of foreign exchange.

Exporting workers and importing remittances are means for governments of coping with unemployment and foreign debt. There are two ways in which governments have secured benefits through these strategies. One of these is highly formalised and the other is simply a by-product of the migration process itself. Among the strongest examples of the formalised mode are South Korea and the Philippines.[22] In the 1970s, South Korea developed extensive programmes to promote the export of workers as an integral part of its growing overseas construction industry, initially to the Middle Eastern OPEC countries and then worldwide. As South Korea entered its own economic boom, exporting workers became a less necessary and attractive option. In contrast, the Filipino government, if anything, expanded and diversified the concept of exporting its citizens as a way of dealing with unemployment and securing needed foreign exchange reserves through their remittances. It is to this case that I turn now as it illuminates a whole series of issues at the heart of this article.

The Filipino government has played an important role in the emigration of Filipino women to the US, the Middle East and Japan, through the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). Established in 1982, it organised and oversaw the export of nurses and maids to high demand areas in the world. High foreign debt and high unemployment combined to make this an attractive policy. Filipino overseas workers send home almost $US 1 billion on average a year in the last few years. On the other side, the various labour importing countries welcomed this policy for their own specific reasons. OPEC countries of the Middle East saw the demand for domestic workers grow sharply after the 1973 oil boom. Confronted with a sharp shortage of nurses, a profession that demanded years of training yet garnered rather

low wages and little prestige or recognition, the US passed the Immigration Nursing Relief Act of 1989 which allowed for the import of nurses.[23] And Japan passed legislation which permitted the entry of 'entertainment workers' into its booming economy in the 1980s, marked by rising expendable incomes and strong labour shortages.[24]

The Filipino government also passed regulations that permitted mail-order bride agencies to recruit young Filipinas to marry foreign men as a matter of contractual agreement. The rapid increase in this trade was centrally due to the organised effort by the government. Among the major clients were the U.S. and Japan. Japan's agricultural communities were a key destination for these brides, given enormous shortages of people, and especially young women, in the Japanese countryside when the economy was booming and demand for labour in the large metropolitan areas was extremely high. Municipal governments made it a policy to accept Filipino brides.

The largest number of Filipinas going through these channels work overseas as maids, particularly in other Asian countries. The second largest group and the fastest growing, are entertainers, largely to Japan.[25] The rapid increase in the numbers of migrants going as entertainers is largely due to the over five hundred 'entertainment brokers' in the Philippines operating outside the state umbrella – even though the government may still benefit from the remittances of these workers. These brokers work to provide women for the sex industry in Japan, where it is basically supported or controlled by organised gangs rather than going through the government controlled program for the entry of entertainers. Women are recruited for singing and entertaining, but frequently, perhaps mostly they are forced into prostitution as well.[26]

The Filipino government approved most mail-order bride organisations until 1989. Under the government of Corazon Aquino, the stories of abuse by foreign husbands led to the banning of the mail-order bride business. But it is almost impossible to eliminate these organisations and they continue to operate in violation of the law. In the US the INS has recently reported that domestic violence towards mail-order wives has become acute. Again, the law operates against these women seeking recourse as they are liable to be detained if they do so before two years of marriage. In Japan, the foreign mail-order wife is not granted full equal legal status and there is considerable evidence showing that many are subject to abuse not only by the husband but by the extended family as well.

While perhaps the one with the most developed programme, the Philippines is not the only country to have explored these strategies. Thailand started a campaign in 1998 after the 1997-8 financial crisis to promote migration for work and recruitment of Thai workers by overseas firms. The government sought to export workers to the Middle East, the US, Great Britain, Germany, Australia and Greece. Sri Lanka's government has tried to export another 200,000 workers in addition to the one million it already has overseas; Sri Lankan women remitted $US 880million in 1998, mostly from their earnings as maids in the Middle East and Far East. Bangladesh organised extensive labour export programmes to the OPEC countries of the Middle East already in the 1970s. This export has continued and is, along with the individual

migration to these and various other countries, notably the US and Great Britain, a significant source of foreign exchange. Its workers remitted about $US 1.4 billion in each of the last few years.[27]

Conclusion

There is by now a fairly long-standing research and theorisation effort engaged in recovering the role of women in international economic processes. The central effort in much of this earlier research literature was to balance the excessive focus, typically unexplicated, on men in international economic development research. In the mainstream development literature, these processes have often, perhaps unwittingly, been represented as neutral when it comes to gender.

In my reading, globalisation has produced yet another set of dynamics in which women are playing a critical rôle. And, once again, the new economic literature on current globalisation processes proceeds as if this new economic phase is gender-neutral. These gender dynamics have been rendered invisible in terms of their articulation with the mainstream global economy. Economic globalisation needs to be understood in its multiple localisations, many of which do not generally get coded as having anything to do with the global economy. One such set of localisations can be found in the alternative cross-border circuits described above in which the rôle of women, and especially the condition of being a foreign woman, is crucial.

Notes

[1] This article is one of several based on the author's larger multi-year project on 'Governance and Accountability in the Global Economy' (Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, USA).

[2] I have used this type of analytic strategy also in my research on strategic instantiations of gendering in the global economic system, arguing that the articulations between globalisation and various types of gendering in economic operations is often not evident. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New Press, 1998), part one.

[3] I have used this kind of theoretical approach in the research on the formation of labour migrations, arguing that these often take place in already existing systems that connect sending and receiving countries. See Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New York: New Press, 1999).

[4] According to Toussaint (Eric Toussaint, 'Poor countries pay more under debt reduction scheme?" w.w.w.twnside.org.sg/souths/twn/title/1921-cn.htm (July 1999)), from 1982 to 1998 indebted countries paid four times their original debts, and at the same time their debt stocks went up by four times. According to Susan George, the South has paid back the equivalent of six Marshall Plans to the North. (Asoka Bandarage, *Women, Population, and Crisis* (London: Zed 1997)). Yet these countries have been paying a significant share of their total revenues to service their debt. Thirty-three of the 41 Highly Indebted Countries paid $3 in debt service payments to the North for every $1 in development assistance. Many of these countries pay over 50% of their government revenues toward debt service or 20 to 25% of their export earnings (Thomas Ambrogi, 'Jubilee 2000 and the campaign for debt cancellation", *National Catholic Reporter* (July 1999)).

[5] This debt burden inevitably has large repercussions on state spending composition. This is well illustrated in the case of Zambia, Ghana and Uganda, three countries, which have been seen as co-operative and responsible by the World Bank as well as effective in implementing SAPs. In Zambia, for example, the government paid $US 1.3 billion in debt but only $US 37million for primary education; Ghana's social expenses, at

$US 75million represented 20% of its debt service; and Uganda paid $US 9 per capita on its debt and only $1 for health care (Asad Ismi, 'Plunder with a human face', *Z Magazine* (February 1998)). Africa's payments reached $US 5 billion in 1998, which means that for every $US 1 in aid, African countries paid $US 1.4 in debt service in 1998.

[6] Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty* (London: Zed/TWN, 1997); Guy Standing, 'Global feminization through flexible labour: A theme revisited', *World Development* (1999) 27(3), pp.583-602; Aminur Rahman, 'Micro-credit initiatives for equitable and sustainable development: who pays?', *World Development* (1999), 27(1), pp.67-82; and Diane Elson, *Male Bias in Development*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). There is, also, an older literature on women and the debt, focused on the implementation of a first generation of Structural Adjustment Programmes in several developing countries linked to the growing debt of governments in the 1980s; this literature has documented the disproportionate burden these Programmes put on women. It is by now a large literature in many different languages and includes a vast number of limited-circulation items produced by various activist and support organizations. For overviews see, e.g. Kathryn Ward, *Women Workers and Global Restructuring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Christine E. Bose and Edna Acosta-Belen (eds.), *Women in the Latin American Development Process: From Structural Subordination to Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Lourdes Beneria and Shelley Feldman (eds.), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* (Boulder Co.: Westview, 1992); York Bradshaw, Rita Noonan, Laura Gash, and Claudia Buchmann, 'Borrowing against the future: children and third world indebtedness', *Social Forces* (1993) 71 (3), pp.629-56; Irene Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development* (New York: Oxford University Press 1990); and Carolyn Moser, 'The impact of recession and structural adjustment policies at the micro-level: low income women and their households in Guayaquil, Ecuador.' *Invisible Adjustment* (Vol. 2. UNICEF, 1989).

[7] On these various issues see, e.g. Diana Alarcon-Gonzalez and Terry McKinley, 'The adverse effects of structural adjustment on working women in Mexico', *Latin American Perspectives* (1999) 26(3) pp.103-117; Claudia Buchmann, 'The debt crisis, structural adjustment and women's education', *International Journal of Comparative Studies*, (1996) 37 (1-2) pp.5-30; Helen Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*, (Boulder Co.: Westview Press, 1995); Erika Jones, 'The gendered toll of global debt crisis', *Sojourner* (1999) 25(3) pp.20-38; and Nilufer Cagatay and Sule Ozler, 'Feminization of the labor force: The effects of long-term development and structural adjustment', *World Development* (1995) 23(11), pp.1883-1894, as well as several of the references cited in the preceding note.

[8] This has been an important element in my research on globalisation: the notion that once there is an institutional infrastructure for globalisation, processes which have basically operated at the national or sub-national level can scale up to the global level even when this is not necessary for their operation. This would contrast with processes that are by their very features global, such as the network of financial centres underlying the formation of a global capital market (e.g. Saskia Sassen, 'Global Financial Centers', *Foreign Affairs*, (1999) 78 (1): 75-87.); or various systems of cross-border migrations (Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New York: New Press, 1999)).

[9] Trafficking has become sufficiently recognised as an issue that it was also addressed in the G8 meeting in Birmingham in May 1998, (IMO (International Migration Office), *Trafficking in Migrants*, (Quarterly Bulletin), Geneva). The heads of the eight major industrialised countries stressed the importance of co-operation against international organised crime and trafficking in persons. The US President issued a set of directives to his administration in order to strengthen and increase efforts against trafficking in women and girls. This in turn generated the legislation initiative by Senator Paul Wellstone; bill S.600 was introduced in the senate in 1999. Hilla Dayan, *Feminist Responses to Globalisation: The Case of Trafficking in Women*. MA Thesis submitted to the University of Chicago, Summer 2000.

[10] The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women has centres and representatives in Australia, Bangladesh, Europe, Latin America, North America, Africa and Asia Pacific. The Women's Rights Advocacy Program has established the Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons to combat the global trade in persons.

[11] See generally Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). For regularly updated sources of information on trafficking, see http://www.hrlawgroup.org/site/programs/traffic.html. See generally Sietske Altink, *Stolen Lives: Trading Women into Sex and Slavery* (New York: Harrington Park Press and London: Scarlet Press 1995); Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition* (London: Routledge 1998); Susan Shannon, 'The global sex trade: humans as the ultimate commodity', *Crime and Justice International* (May

1999), pp.5-25; Lap-Chew Lin and Wijers Marjan, *Trafficking in women, forced labour and slavery-like practices in marriage, domestic labour and prostitution*, (Utrecht, Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV), and Bangkok, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) 1997); and Lin Lim, *The Sex Sector: the Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia*, (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1998).

[12] STV-GAATW report, (Utrecht: Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV), and Bangkok: Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)).

[13] IMO (International Migration Office, Annual Quarterly, *Trafficking in Migrants*, Geneva 1996).

[14] For various items of information including Asian and post-Soviet trafficking, see: http://www.hrlawgroup.org/site/programs/traffic.html.

[15] There is also a growing trade in children for the sex industry – this has long been the case in Thailand but now is also present in several other Asian countries, in Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

[16] IMO 1996.

[17] Global Survival Network, 'Crime and servitude: an expose of the traffic in women for prostitution from the newly independent states': www.globalsurvival.net/femaletrade.html (November 1997).

[18] There are many instances in various reports. Malay brokers sell Malay women into prostitution in Australia. East European women from Albania and Kosovo have been trafficked by gangs into prostitution in London. European teens from Paris and other cities have been sold to Arab and African customers. In the US the police broke up an international Asian ring that imported women from China, Thailand, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam (Booth, William, 'Thirteen charged in gang importing prostitutes', *Washington Post* 21st August 1999). The women were charged between $US 30,000 and $US 40,000 in contracts to be paid through their work in the sex or needle trade. The women in the sex trade were shuttled around several states in the US to bring continuing variety to the clients.

[19] A fact-sheet by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking reports that one survey of Asian sex workers found that rape often preceded their being sold into prostitution and that about one third had been falsely led to becoming sold into prostitution.

[20] Dennis Judd and Susan Fainstein, *The Tourist City*, (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1999).

[21] See e.g. Ryan Bishop and Lillian Robinson, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle*, (1998).

[22] Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[23] About 80% of the nurses brought in under the new act were from the Philippines.

[24] Japan passed a new immigration law – strictly speaking an amendment of an older law, which radically redrew the conditions for entry of foreign workers. It allowed a series of professionals linked to the new service dominated economy – specialists in western style finance, accounting, law, etc. – but made the entry of what it termed 'simple labour' illegal. The latter provision generated a rapid increase in undocumented entries for workers for low-wage jobs. This prohibition underlines the fact that the new law did make special provisions for the entry of 'entertainers'. (Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the Mobility of People and Money*, chapter six (New York: New Press 1998).

[25] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, New and updated edition; 2001, originally published in 1991).

[26] These women are recruited and brought in both through formal legal channels and illegally. Either way they have little power to resist. Even as they are paid below minimum wage, they produce significant profits for the brokers and employers involved. There has been an enormous increase in so-called entertainment businesses in Japan.

[27] Natacha David, 'Migrants made the scapegoats of the crisis', *ICFTU Online*, International Conference of Free Trade Unions, www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/50/012.html.

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Dromoeconomics: Towards a Political Economy of Speed

John Armitage and Phil Graham[1]

> And what are we to say of the enthusiasm of post-industrial companies for the cellphone which enables them to abolish the distinction between working hours and private life for their employees?
>
> Or the introduction in Britain not simply of 'part-time' but of 'zero-hour' contracts, accompanied by the provision of a mobile phone. When the company needs you, *it calls and you come running*.
>
> Paul Virilio.[2]

> It is *at bottom false to say* that living labour consumes capital; capital ... consumes the living in the production process.
>
> The more production comes to rest on exchange value ... the more important do the physical conditions of exchange – the means of communication and transport – become for the costs of circulation. Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.
>
> Karl Marx.[3]

In this article we present an alternative theoretical perspective on contemporary cultural, political and economic practices in advanced countries. Like other articles in this issue of **parallax**, our focus is on conceptualising the *economies of excess*. However, our ideas do not draw on the writings of Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share*, but principally on Virilio's *Speed & Politics: An Essay on Dromology* and Marx's *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*.[4] Using a modest synthesis of tools provided by these theorists, we put forward a tentative conceptualisation of 'dromoeconomics', or, a political economy of speed.

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It is important to note at the outset that our general argument concerning excess speed departs considerably from postmodern conceptions of political economy, as well as from traditional Marxist formulations.[5] Instead, our synthesis arises from our individual contributions to the ideas of 'hypermodernism' and 'hypercapitalism'.[6] We argue that the two contradictory forces of warfare and international trade drive the necessity for a conceptualisation of dromoeconomics.

These apparently antithetical but actually interdependent logics identified by Virilio and Marx find their 'suspension' in an institutionalised form of irrational rationality, or what we call 'hypermodern managerialism'; an extended, 'evolved', or 'advanced' form of sociopathic managerialism. It is a rationalist, secular fundamentalism that now extends into almost every aspect of life. In short – and we take this to be self-evident – dromoeconomics has become necessary because warfare has become industrialised while trade has itself become outright war. Both are indistinguishable in their hypermodern managerialist emphasis for the need for a political economy of speed.

We begin by focusing on the work of Virilio and the idea of excess speed before considering its relationship to complementary aspects of Marx's work on the scientific critique of political economy and our conception of dromoeconomics. The second and third sections concentrate on excess speed and overproduction from a hypermodern perspective before centring on human warfare as the basis of international trade and the suspension of these antithetical forces. In the fourth section we focus our efforts on the concept of hypermodern managerialism and the need for speed, the (il)logic of which suspends the antithetical tensions between war and trade. This section shows how hypermodern managerialism is related not only to war but also to trade, excess speed, the annihilation of space by time and the contemporary conditions of human life. In the fifth section, before concluding our argument, we discuss some of the conceptual difficulties inherent in synthesising Virilio and Marx as well as in developing the concept of dromoeconomics.

Dromoeconomics

For a number of years now, Virilio has been advancing the idea of 'dromology', the study of the logic of speed. Virilio believes that the logic of ever-increasing acceleration lies at the heart of the political and economic organisation and transformation of the contemporary world. As he puts it:

> To me, this means that speed and riches are totally linked concepts. And that the history of the world is not only about the political economy of riches, that is, wealth, money, capital, but also about the political economy of speed. If time is money, as they say, then speed is power.[7]

Thus we see that Virilio equates money, power and speed, implicitly recognising that the circulation time of 'ephemeral' capital (money, for example) can, at least theoretically, substitute for 'massive' wealth and the labour it commands.[8] But it is

not enough to say that we have defined excess speed in terms of dromology and that this, in turn, is linked to wealth and power. Rather, we need some way of being able to grasp the relationship between the *political production* of speed and the *economic production* of manifest wealth.

Clearly, in the current 'globalised' environment, speed, mobility and wealth are somehow linked. But how do we connect the circulation time of money with the speed of violence? Virilio answers by calling for the development of a political economy of speed in addition to a political economy of wealth. Indeed, for Virilio, the 'physiocrats who provided the basic studies of political economy' were doing the 'same sort of work' as himself. However, the difference is that his 'research examines the comparable power of speed and its influence on morals, on politics, strategies and so on'. Virilio continues:

> I'm a physiocrat of speed and not of wealth. So I'm working in the context of very old traditions and absolutely open situations. At present, we still don't know what a political economy of speed really means. It's research which still awaits subsequent realisation.[9]

Despite apparently confounding the Physiocrats' agrarian political economy with de Tracy's school of 'ideology', Virilio's allusions to a research agenda featuring a political economy of speed provide us with food for thought.[10]

It would of course be possible to develop such a theoretical conception from an explicitly Marxian perspective. Yet we believe that an important aim of this article is to attempt a synthesis of Virilio's ideas on dromology with Marx's rather undeveloped yet scientific and critical conceptions of a political economy of capitalist production, circulation, space and time.

Beginning in earnest in 1867 with the publication of *Capital*, Marx developed his scientific critique of political economy when investigating the development of the industrial revolution. For Marx, the origins of capitalist wealth lie in the production of an economic surplus, an *excess* that is distributed unevenly in the context of international economic growth, thus giving eventual rise to conflicts over ownership, prices, profits, wages and employment conditions on a global scale. 'Let me point out once and for all', Marx writes:

> that by classical political economy I mean all the economists who ... have investigated the real internal framework ... of bourgeois relations of production, as opposed to the vulgar economists who only flounder around within the apparent framework of those relations ... systematising in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one.[11]

In Marx's terms, classical political economy gave way to vulgar economics in the first half of the nineteenth century when the bourgeoisie became politically dominant.

Armed with the often-contested authority to subject the growing industrial proletariat to its rule, bourgeois economists abandoned their previous scientific aims and offered the *status quo* as the model for all future developments in political economy. Marx's critique of political economy is therefore a *radical* perspective on the question, definition and central characteristics of classical, conservative and 'neo-classical' economics.[12]

Of course, in the present period, the key question is: how do we synthesise Virilio's call for the development of a political economy of speed with Marx's critique of the political economy of wealth? For us, Virilio and Marx provide the basic starting point for a novel conceptualisation of dromoeconomics, a new political economy of speed. Nonetheless, our inquiry diverges from both Virilio and Marx because it is a synthesis of the related influence of excess speed and its impact on war, on international trade and hypermodern managerialism. For, as Marx suggested:

> *Circulation proceeds in space and time* ... It is ... an essential process of capital ... The *constant continuity* of the process, the unobstructed and fluid transition of value from one form into the other, or from one phase of the process into the next, appears as a fundamental condition for production based on capital to a much greater degree than for all earlier forms of production.[13]

Marx's incisive remarks on circulation, space and time conclude our initial discussion of dromoeconomics. However, it is important to stress that our attempt to synthesise Virilio's ideas on dromology and the political economy of speed with Marx's conception of a critique of political economy is a radical perspective on the conceptualisation of dromoeconomics and the political economy of speed. We now turn to the second section, and to issues of excess speed and overproduction, to the issues of hypermodernism, war and trade.

Excess Speed and Overproduction: Into the Hypercapitalist World of War and Trade

As noted, the significance of our argument with regard to excess speed and overproduction is that it departs markedly from postmodern notions of political economy. Like postmodern political economists, we are of course centrally concerned with the 'difficult restructuring of corporations in a constantly changing cultural climate' but we disagree with postmodernists such as Sassower that this process 'defies the classical categories of capitalism'.[14] Equally importantly, we distance ourselves from conventional Marxist interpretations such as those of Mandel not because we want to eschew the idea of 'late capitalism' but because we are seeking a less determinist epistemology that is open to a rethinking of Marx's corpus.[15] As a result, our own work rests on the ideas of hypermodernism and hypercapitalism, the latter of which is the most significant in the present context. Broadly, we define hypercapitalism as the system within which the most intimate and fundamental aspects of human social life – forms of thought and language – are formally subsumed under capital and become its most predominant commodities. The two most

distinguishing differences between hypercapitalism and its previous forms is the speed at which processes of circulation and self-valorisation occur, and the ephemeral nature of hypercapitalist commodities associated with its speed-of-light infrastructure of communication technologies.[16] In what follows, then, we suggest that the twin antithetical impulses of war and trade power the compulsion for a contemporary conception of dromoeconomics.

As Virilio and Marx have both argued, all capitalist trade presupposes the overproduction of *something*, an excess of speed or a particular commodity within a community, for instance. It also presupposes a perceived or potential need for something for which a particular person or community lacks the means to produce, and which another person, group, or community produces to excess. All human activity produces *something*. And this something, and the activity that produces it, is the axiomatic basis of excess production. Excess production is a *time-dependent process*. Therefore dromoeconomics becomes an absolute imperative for systemic overproduction. This is because, as Virilio and Marx separately suggest, not only do the 'higher speeds belong to the upper reaches of society' and 'the slower to the bottom' but also, in a very real sense, 'the whole development of wealth rests on the creation of disposable time'.[17] Speed, disposable time, surplus production, and a devotion to abstract wealth constitute one side of the two interdependent and contradictory extremes of the political economy of speed: trade and war.

However, one of the earliest forms of socially institutionalised excess is well evidenced by the works of Virilio and Marx with regard to the wars of antiquity, to the maintenance and, crucially, to the *movement* of standing armies.[18] Considered historically, war is for Virilio a 'method of total control over a territory and of a population'.[19] War is thus a matter of necessity in settled societies. Indeed, according to Marx, throughout the history of human settlement, war has been:

> the great comprehensive task, the great communal labour which is required either to occupy the objective conditions of being there alive, or to protect and perpetuate the occupation. Hence the commune consisting of families [is] initially organized in a warlike way – as a system of war and army, and this is one of the conditions of its being there [in a particular place] as proprietor.[20]

To some extent, then, it is possible to speculate that professional warfare – mercenary warfare – is one of the earliest institutions of overproduction. It is therefore feasible to argue that it is the institution upon which all established systems of excess production, agrarian and industrial are founded.[21] For us, therefore, the logics of war and trade are, at their roots, historically inseparable.

It has long been recognised that, while trade is dependent on the overproduction of speed, capitalism is also based on *systemic* economic excess. Indeed, the systematic and conscious production of *massive* excess which, according to Virilio and Marx, is founded firstly on 'the increasing speed of information transmission' and secondly on production 'for export, for the external market'.[22] Thus capitalism, by definition, and at its very foundation, has its historical roots in warfare and *international* trade.

And since excess production implies an emphasis on creating excess time, relatively speaking, economic growth in contemporary capitalism appears to be reliant on the production of faster processes of production. Nowhere in known history has this been achieved more intensively than in the world wars of the twentieth century.

Herein lies a central paradox, which is expressed by the very nature of what is called, rather mystically by postmodern political economists, 'globalisation'. International trade and its imperatives for ever-accelerating productive activities is the organising logic of the 'globalised' society's tempo. That is to say, the social organisation of overproduction demands, whether positively or negatively, ever-more 'efficient' use of fractured, punctuated and rigidly organised social time – seconds, hours, days, months and years – each of which has its socially significant meaning in relation to excess production. However, postmodern globalisation cannot simply refer to the restructuring of corporations, since it apparently requires increasingly massive militaries to maintain its trajectory. This is no less true even if we accept the current reduction of nuclear arsenals by the superpowers and the recent reappearance of tribal, ethnic and religious militias and paramilitaries around the world. For there is a paradox at the heart of these two co-existent systems, war and trade. It is this: whereas globalisation is said by postmodern political economists to be dependent on, and to produce, increasing amounts of inter-national 'harmony' and depends, by definition, on the expansion and integration of national economies, the increasingly complex and expensive system of warfare presupposes increasing amounts of inter- and intra-national conflict.[23] War therefore appears as an antithetical force to that of international trade. But that is not the case. They are complementary systems.

This, then, is what we mean by the hypercapitalist world of war and trade. Today, both systems command, control, solicit, and deploy highly sophisticated information technologies, including, and especially, communication technologies. Both are concerned with control of space and time, and the production and consumption of *people*. Both are ultimately concerned with increased efficiences of time, acceleration, *increased rates of increasing speed*.[24] Both are intra- and inter-national systems. And, despite their apparently antithetical natures, they are in fact unitary and unifying aspects of the same hypercapitalist system.

Any political economy of speed will, by necessity, be two-sided. As Virilio has suggested, war is 'the art of embellishing death' while Marx has noted the excess production of death and the excess production of the means of destruction.[25] On the other, we have the production of excess time – surplus troops and surplus labour, *surplus people* – and the excess production of the *means of excess production*. Combined with social and religious reasons, these both seemingly rely upon and solicit increases in the velocity of technology, violence and population growth. In trade, acceleration is sought to reduce production, consumption and circulation time; in warfare, to reduce destruction time.

Suspension

These outwardly contradictory yet truly interlocking developments discovered through focusing on the work of Virilio and Marx attain their suspension in a

gruesome, 'pragmatic', and programmatic synthesis that feeds on the antithetical relationship that unites them. The economies of excess speed and power depend upon surplus time, surplus value and thus surplus labour being available. What, for example, asks Virilio, is to become of the surplus 'people whose lives are being destroyed' by the technological revolution currently bringing about the 'end of salaried work'?[26] Marx answers that such revolutions translate – precisely – into a demand for more people:

> what is required for all forms of surplus labour is growth of population; of the labouring population for the first form [absolute surplus labour]; of population generally for the second [relative surplus labour].[27]

Speeding technological development and growing wealth require increases in surplus time; surplus time requires surplus labour; surplus labour means surplus human activity, *surplus human life*. This last is manifest in the explosion of global populations during the last century.[28]

Meanwhile, as Virilio maintains, the fastest growing part of the global economy's 'consumer goods' sector is armaments. Indeed, for him, the recent war in Kosovo not only 'gave fresh impetus' to the military-industrial complex but also to the development of a new 'military-*scientific* complex'. As Virilio suggests, we 'can see this in China ... [and] in Russia with its development of stealth planes and other very sophisticated military machines'.[29] Or, as Marx puts it, in mechanised, dromoeconomic hypercapitalism, '[i]nvention becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect which determines and solicits it'.[30] Simultaneously, according to the United States (US) Census Bureau, the global population continues to mushroom at the rate of about 80 million people per year.[31] Human life – 'the labour market' – along with its means of destruction remains, quite clearly, the real 'growth' areas at the beginning of the 21st century. Each, it seems, provides the rationale and impetus for the other.

Hypermodern Managerialism: The Need for Speed

We call the programme that actively suspends the central dromoeconomic paradox *hypermodern managerialism*, the irrational 'rationality' of trade and warfare management, both of which have fallen progressively under the same logic since Fredrick W. Taylor's assault on 'industrial soldiering' became *sine qua non* in industrialised nations.[32] Hypermodern managerialism has its secular faith in 'the reality of numbers'. It is a religion presided over by high priests of technical abstraction. Its most vicious phase begins in 1961, with the intensification of managerialist values in the defence department of the US.

That intensification was personified – though not invented – by Robert McNamara – the then US Secretary of Defence and former president of the Ford Motor Company.[33] Armed with the rational, militaristic, 'Management By Objectives' (MBO) system, McNamara mounted an assault on the defence industries' economic inefficiencies.[34] From that point onwards, global warfare came to be seen in the US

as 'a rational business', no different from any other.[35] War and trade once again fell (officially) under the same system of management for the first time since the liberal overthrow of mercantilism.

McNamara decided that from a business perspective the Cold War had been run very inefficiently.[36] To solve this, he 'concluded that it would be rational to limit armament costs by producing larger runs of each weapon and selling the surplus abroad'.[37] This would have a number of desirable effects, improving the balance of trade for the US and making the production of arms much less expensive. It would also ensure 'a unity of material' amongst allies of the US throughout the West should they need to fight a war together.[38] VietNam, the first fully-fledged managerialist war in history, was an abject, destructive and miserable failure. It rang in the era of hypermodern managerialism.

Some insight into the militant, neo-mercantilist logic of our emergent global system can be seen in the attitudes expressed by Friedman:

> The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist – McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnel Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. 'Good ideas and technologies need a strong power that promotes those ideas by example and protects those ideas by winning on the battlefield,' says the foreign policy historian Robert Kagan.[39]

Here the dromoeconomic paradox becomes much more crystalline. As Virilio suggests above, the most excessive, massive and currently profitable sector of 'consumer goods' production is the armaments industry, an industry dependent on what Marx called the annihilation of space by time and, today, paradoxically, by distance.[40] Capital, too, has precisely the same tendencies and dependencies.[41] The productive excesses of capital, which presuppose ever-expanding populations and geographical markets, are led by economies of speed, or more specifically, by an industrialised human culling machine – the military-industrial complex – on the one hand, and by a system of parasitic and abstract speculation – the financial market – on the other.

Even though it is the single largest sector in the 'consumer goods' market, armaments constitutes a minuscule percentage of global trade once we include the currently unsustainable levels of speculation in financial abstractions. In 1995, the global economic trade in physical goods totalled $US 3.9 trillion *per annum*.[42] Approximately one-third of this was arms sales. In the same year, $US1.7 trillion *per day* was traded in currency alone, 100 times the amount of actual goods and services traded. In 1999, the currency trade reached $US6 trillion per day.[43] The 'parasitic' trade in monetary illusions has replaced production of the means of life as the focus for the 'new economy'.[44] As Marx argues above, no longer does circulation in space and time play the rôle of a mere facilitator. Circulation has become an essential process of capital, an end in itself.

The largest corporate mergers and take-overs in history have happened in the last two years. What Virilio calls 'globalitarian' economic power is today centralised to a degree previously unknown in history, with over fifty percent of wealthiest economic entities being corporations, not countries. As Virilio notes:

> Now, through the single market, through globalisation, through the convergence of time towards a single time, a world time, a time which comes to dominate local time and the stuff of history, what emerges – through cyberspace, through the big telecommunications conglomerates is a new totalitarianism ... and this is what I call globalitarianism. It is the totalitarianism of all totalities.[45]

Meanwhile, the US multi billion-dollar war machine is presented as the primary producer of global peace. The overall result: the shrill calls for increased efficiencies of 'friction-free' speed by irrational management become ever louder based on claims of success. Billions of dollars are made and lost in seconds in a form of trade which is both illusory and inflationary.[46] More people have been murdered in a violent manner since 1945, when world peace apparently broke out, than in all the wars of the previous 100 years: over *75 million lives*, most of these civilian, have been lost in the ongoing series of 'minor incursions'.[47]

Hypermodern trade and hypermodern wars are economies of excess speed, life and death; theirs is the logic of *dromoeconomics*. And all of this is joyously construed as being productive of wealth, or excess *time*. But the over-production of speed is the *negation of time*; it is the *consumption and destruction of time* rather than its emancipation. Conversely, the production of arms is the latent negation of human life, and thus of production itself. The paradox of Schumpterian 'creative destruction', carried to its illogical extremes, is now juxtaposed to a vulgar Marxian impulse for a revolutionary and 'democratic' global economy. But, as Virilio suggests, the '*speed of light does not merely transform the world. It becomes the world. Globalisation is the speed of light.*[48] Murder at twice the speed of sound, beyond the horizon of murderers, is juxtaposed to and complemented by the global integration of the telecommunications media through which speed-of-light speculation in financial abstractions forms by far the largest and most 'productive' sector of the global economy. It would seem humanity has reached the apotheosis of an almost universal system of irrational rationality, the logic of hypermodern managerialism.

Towards a Political Economy of Speed

Although the focus of this article has centred on Virilio's excess speed, Marx's critique of political economy and the concept of dromoeconomics, it is important to note that there remain at least three critical conceptual problems and interpretative questions that require resolution.

The first concerns the political economy of excess speed, or, rather, Virilio's obsessive conceptualisation of it in terms of war and dromology. As Brügger maintains, Virilio's formulation tends towards 'one-dimensionality and totality'.[49] In short, according to

Brügger, in Virilio's world, acceleration explains everything. Consequently, Virilio's analyses tend to overlook other forces at work that he professes to be interested in, namely, the economics of overproduction. Virilio's work is problematic because, although he is deeply concerned with the idea of a political economy of speed, in reality he merely focuses on war and the *political* logic of speed, leaving aside any meaningful explanation of international trade, its *economic* production and suspension. While it would be untrue to suggest that Virilio's analyses focus *only* on speed, it would be true to say that it is virtually impossible to develop a conception of hypermodern managerialism and the need for speed from his chosen stance: there is no method in Virilio's madness. That is why, in this article, we have focused our efforts on providing a Marxian method for a Virilio-inspired hypermodern dromoeconomics.

There are a number of conceptual advantages associated with synthesising Virilio and Marx with the aim of developing the idea of dromoeconomics. But there are also a variety of drawbacks. For some, Marx's political economy veers towards an obsession with production, and what postmodern thinkers like Sassower consider to be his 'essentialist' tendencies, especially in relation to his broad claims to, and belief in, truth, scientificity, and progress.[50] Nevertheless, in this context, the richness of Marx's standpoint on excess production stems from the fact that, unlike Virilio's conception of speed, he does not believe that production literally explains everything. In truth, Marx's writings are, in Kellner's conceptual terms, 'multiperspectival' in scope.[51] They seek to take account not only of political and economic forces, but also of war, speed, the globalisation of capital, the effects and functions of philosophy and metaphysics, and, indeed, of any number of other forces in human society. Marx's 'multiperspectivism' is thus to be welcomed because it is only from such a perspective that a dromoeconomics may actually be developed. Our argument is that a fusion of Virilio's analyses of speed with Marx's critique of political economy is the most fruitful way to develop a dromoeconomics.

The second set of problems concerns the use-value of an approach that centres its analysis on excess speed, overproduction, hypercapitalism, war and trade. Obviously, we believe that there is much to be gained from such an approach. Yet a common criticism of Virilio's writings is that they are not simply overburdened with newly minted neologisms, but that they also arrive unannounced and without any subsequent definition or explanation. However, no such criticisms could be levelled at Marx's works in this regard. Indeed, his conceptual writings are known for their prolonged efforts of clarification and exegesis. Our vantagepoint is therefore founded on the belief that by fusing Virilio's anarchic and conceptual excesses with Marx's theoretical precision, a new kind of hypermodern political economy of speed can be forged.

The recognition of hypermodern political economy also implies the acknowledgement of the significance of suspension, hypermodern managerialism and the need for speed. This leads to our third and most important set of problems and questions. For our study of hypermodern managerialism and militarism is not intended as an 'objective' description of the *status quo*, but as a new and hopefully significant critique of such

developments. Indeed, we maintain that there is something fundamentally at fault in the present system of hypermodern managerialism and globalitarianism founded on the irrational promotion of war in terms of international trade and vice versa. Is there an alternative? We think there is.

First, it is important while developing the idea of dromoeconomics to continue to question orthodox thinking about the rôle of speed in the economy. This is particularly the case with regard to the current mania for fast companies; unrelenting and unreasonable efficiency gains; hypermodern managerialism's concerns with dromological resource allocation and optimisation; as well as the irrational conduct of trade and war at the international level.[52] Second, it is important to focus on a viewpoint that simultaneously encompasses new concerns posed by the globalisation of hypercapitalism, as well as those addressed by the traditions of classical political economy. Specifically, 'dromoeconomists' need not deny the orthodox insistence on the significance of international trade. However, we argue that such a focus is too one-dimensional to grasp the reality of contemporary global conditions. It is for this reason that we have decided to centre our conceptualisation on the neglected dimension of the political economy of speed. For what is required, above all, is recognition of the centrality of speed in contemporary societies. But such an acknowledgement must also be joined by the recognition that a focus on speed alone will not, in and of itself, suffice. It is imperative, therefore, to link the issue of speed to relationships of power, of exploitation, of coercion, of hierarchy, and to the accelerating characteristics of the work and market places in global capitalism.

Conclusion

Our tentative dromoeconomics is, to some degree, an acknowledgement that contemporary capitalist societies are 'dromocratic' societies, societies constantly on the move and governed according to dominant perceptions about the political and economic logic that their trade and war technologies demand. They are societies that are truly dynamic. However, they are ones that remain not only in dangerous disequilibria, but also – apparently – in delirious ignorance of the damage being wrought by their own systemic and turbulent logics. Moving towards a genuine understanding of dromoeconomics in contemporary society therefore entails a conception of the political economy of speed.

But it also entails the recognition that Virilio's emphasis on excess speed and Marx's analysis of overproduction present us with opportunities for thinking about hypermodern explanations of war and trade that differ significantly from those offered by either postmodern or traditional Marxian political economists.

Our preliminary agenda for a political economy of speed centred on suspension is merely one aspect of dromoeconomics. It is by no means definitive or exhaustive. We simply hope to point towards what we think is an important and undertheorised aspect; hypermodern managerialism and the need for speed, and the expression of these in the logics of war and trade. Our emphasis on hypermodern managerialism is necessary because armed conflict is a constituent feature of industrialisation and

international trade. Globalitarian economic power, hypermodern trade and hypermodern war are the foundations of the globalisation of dromoeconomics. Moving towards an understanding of dromoeconomics, despite its conceptual difficulties, is therefore no longer an option. It is a necessity. In conclusion, we believe that our conception of dromoeconomics is significant not because it is yet another neologism but because of the important question it raises, the question of the political economy of speed.

Notes

[1] Thanks to Greg Hearn, Douglas Kellner and Bernard McKenna for their valuable comments on earlier drafts.

[2] Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb* (London: Verso, 2000), pp.67. Original emphasis.

[3] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1973), p.349 and p.524. Original emphasis.

[4] George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol 1, Consumption, R. Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1988 [1949]); Paul Virilio, *Speed & Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, M. Polizzotti (trans.) (New York: Semiotext (e), 1986 [1977]); Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol 1, B. Fowkes (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1976 [1867]); and Marx, 1973.

[5] See, for instance, R. Sassower 'Postmodern Political Economy', in his *Cultural Collisions: Postmodern Technoscience* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.113–123; and E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, J. de Bres (trans.) (London: New Left Books, 1975).

[6] John Armitage (ed.), *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond* (London: Sage, 2000); P. Graham, 'Hypercapitalism: A Political Economy of Informational Idealism', *New Media and Society*, 2 (2), (2000a), pp.131–156.

[7] Armitage, 2000, p.35.

[8] Marx, 1973, p.518.

[9] Armitage, 2000, p.5.

[10] See, for example, E. Kennedy, ' "Ideology" from Destutt de Tracy to Marx', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 40, (3) (1979), pp.353–368.

[11] Marx, 1976, pp.174–5.

[12] On the complex question of determining the nature of political economy see, for example, V. Mosco, 'What is Political Economy?', in his *The Political Economy of Communication* (London: Sage, 1996) pp.22–69.

[13] Marx, 1973, pp.533–535.

[14] Sassower, 1995, p.113.

[15] Mandel, 1975. On recent efforts to rethink Marx see, for instance, G. McLennan, 'Re-Canonizing Marx', *Cultural Studies* 13 (4), 1999, pp.555–576.

[16] Graham, 2000a.

[17] Armitage, 2000, p.35; and Marx, 1973, p.398.

[18] Armitage, 2000, p.36; and Marx, 1973, p.468.

[19] Armitage, 2000, p.45.

[20] Marx, 1973, p.474.

[21] Marx, 1973, p.491.

[22] Armitage, 2000, p.36; and Marx, 1973, p.511.

[23] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), '21st Century economic dynamics: anatomy of a long boom: Key points of the discussion', Expo 2000 OECD forum for the future, conference 2, Paris, OECD (1999).

[24] Phil Graham, 'Time, space, new media, and political economy: a history of hype and hypercapitalism' (Manuscript under review, 2000b).

[25] John Armitage, 'The Kosovo W@r Did Take Place: An Interview with Paul Virilio' in J. Armitage (ed.), *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (London: Sage, 2001), forthcoming; and Marx, 1976, p.751.

[26] Armitage, 2000, p.37.

[27] Marx, 1973, p.771.

[28] At the turn of the twentieth century, best available estimates put global population at 1.5–1.7 billion. At the year 2000, the mid-year global population is estimated to be 6,073,104,685: United States (US) Census Bureau *Historical Estimates of World Population* (2000a): http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldhis.html; US Census Bureau *Total Midyear Population for the World: 1950–2050* (2000b): http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldpop.html. Both Washington, Department of Commerce.

[29] Armitage, 2001, forthcoming. Original emphasis.

[30] Marx, 1973, p.704.

[31] US Census Bureau, 2000b.

[32] T. Dixon, *Communication, Organization, and Performance* (New Jersey: Ablex, 1996).

[33] J. R. Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards* (Ontario: Penguin, 1992), pp.81–89.

[34] Dixon, 1996. See, in particular, Chapter 3; and Saul, 1992, pp.81–90.

[35] On the genesis of managerial warfare, see Mandel, 1975, p.301 and Saul, 1992, pp.81–90.

[36] Saul, 1992, pp.81–83.

[37] Saul, 1992, p.82.
[38] Saul, 1992, p.82.
[39] T. L. Friedman, 'A manifesto for the fast world', *New York Times Magazine*, (1999, March 28), pp.40–44, p.61, pp.70–71, p.84 and p.96.
[40] Armitage, 2000, pp.1–23.
[41] Graham, 2000b, forthcoming; and Marx, 1973, p.524.
[42] J. R. Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Maryborough: Penguin, 1997), p.21.
[43] J. R. Saul, 'Democracy and Globalisation', Address to the Evatt Foundation, Sydney, Australia, 2000. URL consulted March 1, 2000: http://www.abc.net.au/specials/saul/fulltext.html).
[44] P. Kennedy, 'Coming to Terms with Contemporary Capitalism: Beyond the Idealism of Globalisation and Capitalist Ascendancy Arguments', *Sociological Research Online*, 3 (2) (1998), online journal). http://www.socioresonline.org.uk/socioresonline/3/2/6.html.
[45] Armitage, 2000, p.38.
[46] Graham, 2000b, forthcoming.
[47] Saul, 1997, p.12.
[48] Armitage, 2001, forthcoming.
[49] N. Brügger, 'Connecting themes in the Work of Paul Virilio – A Critical Introduction', Conference Paper prepared for the *3rd International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference*, 21–25 June 2000, Birmingham, UK, pp.8.
[50] Sassower, 1995, pp.113–123.
[51] D. Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[52] On the role of speed in contemporary capitalist business see, for example, Nigel Thrift's recent paper on 'fast companies' entitled 'Animal Spirits: Performing Cultures in the New Economy' prepared for the *8th (Millennium) Conference of the International Joseph A. Schumpeter Society*, 28 June–1st July 2000, University of Manchester, UK.

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